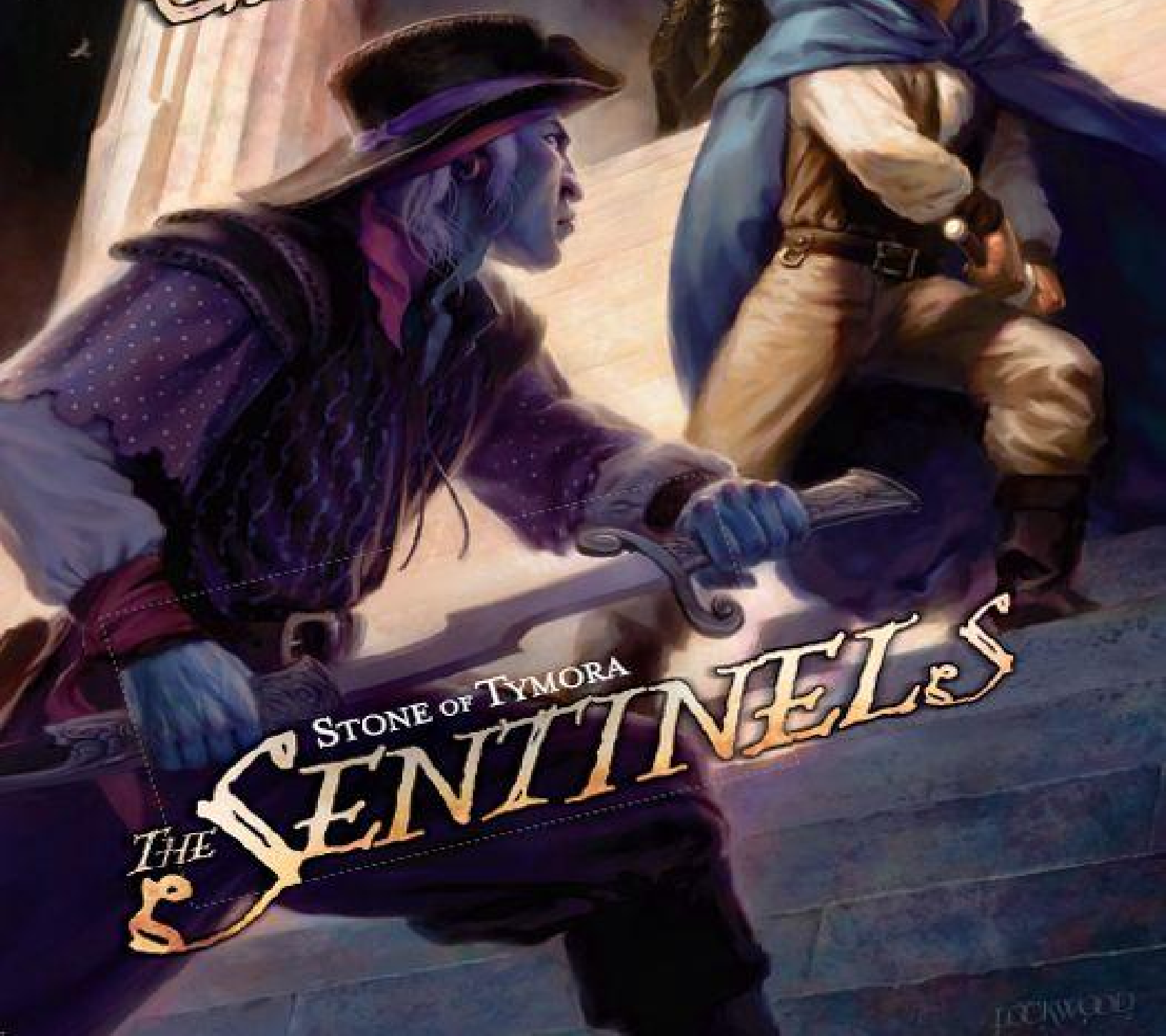


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# THE SENTINELS

R.A. SALVATORE  
& GENO



BOOKS FOR  
YOUNG READERS

The Sentinels  
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## ***Part One***



Thirteen thousand eight hundred and sixty-eight. Thirteen thousand eight hundred and sixty-nine.

The darkness was absolute. My pirate captors had left me no torch, and the sun had set long ago.

Thirteen thousand nine hundred twenty-four. Thirteen thousand nine hundred twenty-five.

The flicker of their campfire had traced its way down the short, east-facing tunnel to the locked door to a tiny chamber, my cell. The light had been brighter this night than the previous few nights, and the uneven crack at the bottom of the door had allowed plenty of light in. But that light, too, had finally gone out.

Fourteen thousand and seven. Heartbeats, that is, since the light had gone out.

I kept my legs crossed, sitting as comfortably as I could in the cramped cave. I held my breathing steady, keeping count as precisely as I could. Of course my count would be inexact, but that was hardly the point.

The pirates had been drinking heavily, like every night. Most or all of them had surely passed out. Still, I figured to play it safe I'd give them three hours so the last stragglers could drift off to sleep.

Fourteen thousand eighty-eight.

Three hours, fourteen thousand four hundred heartbeats. Soon.

Neither my hands nor my feet were bound. I had gained the pirate captain's trust. Or, more to the point, I had convinced him that he wouldn't hear the rest of my story if he didn't treat me better. And how he had wanted to hear my story!

But I had no intention of letting him hear the rest of it. I had no intention of spending another day here at all.

Fourteen thousand one hundred fifty-six.

The door lock would pose little challenge. I'd been saving some bones from my meals, and as I mostly got scraps, bones were in plentiful supply. I selected two, thin enough to fit in the lock, firm but not rigid, less likely to snap. They would be my lock picks, my key.

Fourteen thousand two hundred thirty-seven.

There could be guards posted at the entrance. I might be able to sneak past them. Maybe I'd have to fight my way out. Either way, I figured I could handle it. I had to, after all.

Fourteen thousand three hundred and five.

My story would have come to an end eventually. And when that happens, the pirates would kill me, of that I had no doubt. So maybe they'd kill me as I tried to escape, but at least I'd die doing something. I had little dread left of the prospect of the end. It was the prospect of the end on someone else's terms that really frightened me.

And I would not let that happen.

Fourteen thousand four hundred. Time to go.

The door made hardly a sound, and my footsteps made even less. My assumption was correct: two guards sat at the end of the tunnel. But they'd been drinking and were snoring loudly. I took a cutlass from one of them, feeling much better with a sword in my hand, even that unwieldy piece of metal. Then I crept past onto the narrow, sandy beach.

The moon was nearly full, the sky clear, and the view was better than I'd hoped it would be. I knew from observing the sunlight that the cave faced east. What I didn't know was that the mainland was visible from the beach.

Pirates lay strewn about wherever they'd passed out, empty bottles and half-eaten food lying next to many of them. It seemed they'd made no attempt whatsoever to find even a comfortable place to lie down. They were sprawled across rocks, flotsam, the various wreckage of and loot from ships.

To my left, the beach extended out of sight. The debris, including the hulks of many wrecked ships, stretched far. A quick glance out to sea revealed the reason for the wrecks: not a quarter mile offshore, several huge rocks jutted out of the water. The tide was low, almost at its lowest point. At high tide, those rocks would be invisible, the strait treacherous to anyone not intimately familiar with those rocks.

To my right, the beach wrapped around a rocky jut. The pirate ship would be there, I figured. A fine hiding place the island made for pirates.

It also made it tough for me to get out of there. No boats rested along the beach. I would either have to take some of the flotsam and use it as a raft or head for the ship itself and try to steal a launch. And the ship would be better guarded than some desolate stretch of drunk- and debris-laden beach.

I moved down the beach, looking for a promising piece of driftwood, but nothing stood out. I decided I would have to risk the pirate ship, so I headed for the rocky spur.

A cave dug into the side of it—perhaps a passage through? It was worth a look, so I crept closer.

A light flared within, and I ducked out of sight. A figure emerged from the cave, carrying a torch. Another followed him, and another after that.

“Impressive,” the third figure said. He didn’t look directly at me, but I knew he was addressing me. “Or, it woulda been impressive if it warn’t a setup.”

I recognized the voice—it was the pirate captain. He couldn’t have seen me, I figured, so I stayed quiet.

But the beach behind me was suddenly filled with light. Torches flared wherever I’d seen a pirate passed out.

Soon, all those lights moved my way. They’d been watching me through their half-closed eyes. They knew where I was, so I stepped out into the light.

“Fine, then,” I said. “Which of you should I kill first?”

The pirate captain laughed. "None, I think," he said. "I think ye should sit down an' tell us more o' yer story."

"And why would I do that when you'll just kill me at the end?"

"Aye, we might, a' tha'," he said. "But we'll kill ye just th' same if ye don't speak as if ye do. An' if ye speak, then at the least someone will know yer story."

The pirates gathered around, all holding torches, all but one brandishing a weapon. I held up my stolen cutlass to the unarmed pirate, and he laughed at me. His fellows soon joined him.

"Why the setup?" I asked. "Why let me get past the guards at all?"

"I wanted ter know if ye really were capable o' what ye been saying," he said. "Ye tell a fine tale, but tha' don' make it true. What we seen t'night, though, tha' makes me think ye ain't lying."

I thought for a moment. "Fine," I said. "Where did we leave off?"

"On a ship, leaving an island," the captain replied. He motioned to the crew. Some of the pirates took seats on rocks. Others brought bits of flotsam and jetsam and made a pile nearby. One dropped a torch into the pile, and soon we had a roaring fire. "Ye'd found yer lost stone, watched that demon Asbeel plunge into the sea, and ye were sailing away."

"Sailing away on a ship, with no wind, and hoofbeats approaching," I said. "Indeed ..."

## **CHAPTER ONE**

"Who goes there? And ... how?" the sailor at the rail meekly called. He stared down from the rail into the dense fog and saw what I saw: the silhouette of a woman riding a horse at the center of a strange mist.

"Permission to come aboard," the woman's voice rang out.

From my high vantage point in the crow's nest, I could almost see the murmur that rolled across *Sea Sprite's* deck.

"I ... we ... I don't ...," the sailor stammered.

"Permission granted," Captain Deudermont called from the middeck.

The captain approached the rail, his stern gaze forcing the sailors back to their posts. But those who had no immediate duties lined the rail, trying to get a glimpse of the mysterious rider. Joen, the girl beside me in the crow's nest, stepped lightly onto the top peg of the ladder.

"Wait," I said to her. "I have something I need to ask you."

She smiled at me and dropped from view, descending rapidly to the deck. I rolled my eyes and followed her.

The fog had cleared by the time I reached the deck, and even Deudermont's pirate prisoners stood idly by, watching. He'd allowed them to move freely about the decks because we needed help with the ship—and there was nowhere they could run to in any case, given how far we were out to sea. The great mass of sailors and their pirate captives were

united in their desire to know how someone had reached us this far out without a boat. I knew the horse was Haze, so I was more concerned with who was riding her. I had only ever seen one other person ride Haze, and he was dead.

“I am an emissary from the Lady’s Hall, the temple of Tymora in Baldur’s Gate,” a voice said. It was a beautiful voice, high and strong at the same time, like music. It was a voice I knew well.

It was Jaide, a beautiful elf, a priestess of Tymora, and friend of my mentor, Perrault.

I sprinted to the rail, nearly losing my balance as my feet slipped on the wet deck. I grasped at the rail for support and slid hard into it. And it’s a good thing *Sea Sprite* still had some strength in her or I would have busted right through and gone for a swim. Under normal circumstances, the sailors would surely have laughed at my clumsiness—I was used to that—but all eyes were focused on the two forms standing calmly and casually on the surface of the water.

I had not seen Haze since I left her in Baldur’s Gate after a long, fast run, trying desperately to save Perrault. A part of me had feared the horse dead—or rather, that she had left this plane of existence, for I doubted such a magical creature could truly die. But there she stood, tall and strong, her white coat sparkling with salt spray. She must have been tired. We were far out to sea, and walking on water quickly exhausted her, but she didn’t show it—nor did the figure seated on her bare back.

Jaide seemed to radiate white light, like a beacon through the thick fog. Her head was turned to the stern of the ship, showing me only her profile: her sharp elf features and her long raven hair. I couldn’t see her eyes, but I knew from past experience that they would be the brightest, most brilliant of orbs.

Joen’s hand, petite but strong and callused from long days of work, grasped the rail, resting beside my hand. She let out a gasp of disbelief.



Tonnid, a sailor and my friend, chuckled and turned to Joen. "Amazin', ain't it? A horse all th' way out 'ere! Some mighty magic, I s'pose," he said.

Joen nodded, but I knew she didn't share his wonder. She had been on the first ship I'd ridden Haze to, so she knew well the horse's power. And she must have known the source of the commotion before she even got to the rail, as I had. What, then, had surprised her so?

And there was something else in Joen's look, something more than simple shock. Her eyes were narrowed, her gaze fixed and intent. She looked angry.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, and she turned a cold gaze my way.

"Your ride is here," she said, her lips twisting, her eyes strangely wet.

"My—?" I started, but was interrupted when Captain Deudermont's kingly voice split the silent air.

"Well met, priestess," said the captain. "But what can we do for you out here?"

If Deudermont was surprised at all by the presence of horse and rider on the rolling waves, he showed it not at all. Then again, he had listened to my whole tale to that point, so he knew of Haze already, and I'd guess that a man such as Deudermont had seen stranger things in his life.

"What do you mean, my 'ride'?" I whispered to Joen, who looked back at me as though I'd done something wrong.

"I have come to speak with you, Captain Deudermont," Jaide said, and the fact that she knew the captain's name got the attention of the sailors around her. "I have come with a warning."

I'm pretty sure she glanced at me just then, but I couldn't be sure—the priestess seemed to be ignoring me, though she must have seen me there at the rail. I was just about to call her name when Captain Deudermont said to her, "Bring your horse to our stern, and my men will hoist you both up on the launch. Unless there's something terrible descending

on us in the next few moments, we'll get you warm and get you fed. Then we can speak at length of this dire warning."

"Haze will find her way to the deck," the elf said, patting the mare's muscled neck. "But I would speak with you sooner."

"My men will throw you a rope, then," he said, turning away from the rail.

"That won't be necessary," she replied, and the light that was Jaide disappeared in an instant then reappeared on the deck.

If Deudermont was fazed at all, he didn't show it. He extended his arm, which she took, and he led her to his cabin.

"Joen?" I asked, but all she could do was stare after Jaide and the captain. If I didn't know any better, I would have said she was jealous.

"I don't know why she's here," I told Joen.

She looked at me funny and stalked off to her duties.

I moved toward the ladder to the crow's nest and my post. The sailors were lowering a gangplank to help Haze aboard. I wasn't strong enough, and only so many hands could fit around the platform, so I left that for burlier men. But the chill north wind was blowing again. Freezing up in the crow's nest for no good purpose seemed a bad idea, and I was a little confused still by Joen's reaction to the appearance of Jaide, so I stayed on deck. That, and I was curious about the elf woman's warning—I couldn't help feeling I had something to do with it. Or more accurately, that the Stone of Tymora had something to do with it.

Excitement still rippled through the crew. The sailors seemed to be pay little attention to anything but their own tasks and their hushed conversations with the men standing next to them. Not a soul even looked at me.

Jaide hadn't seemed to notice me, and I have to admit I was feeling more than a bit left out. But with the crew distracted, it wasn't too hard for me to pretend to work a

little here, make like I was tying a knot there, and check the rigging a few steps farther until I found an out-of-the-way place right next to the door to the captain's quarters. I pressed my ear against the door and listened.

I heard only Captain Deudermont's voice inside, laying out the events of the past couple tendays. He told her about how his ship had been commissioned a pirate hunter by the Lords of Waterdeep. In Waterdeep, I'd overheard the pirate Chrysaor plotting to locate the Stone of Tymora—my stone. I, along with the crew, convinced Deudermont to sail his ship to catch the pirate, only to find out we'd been led into a trap. A group called the Circle had used Chrysaor to lure our ship onto the island where they'd hidden the stone, and where they planned to hold me along with it. With the help of Joen, I managed to scuttle their plans and recover the stone, and we'd made a hasty escape aboard *Sea Sprite*. He told the story so well, I found myself lost in his voice. It took me a long while to pull out of that trance, to remember that I had, in fact, been along for that adventure, that the story included me, often even focused on me. I had never heard Deudermont spin a yarn before, and hadn't realized he was possessed of such a talent, so much like Perrault. He even had me holding my breath when he spoke of *Sea Sprite's* collision with Chrysaor's ship, *Lady Luck*, with the tumbling mast and all, as if I were afraid he'd rewrite the story to say we'd all sank and drowned, and as if his saying it would have made it come true.

After a while, Deudermont came to the end of his tale. "Will you now humor me with your own tale?" he asked the priestess. "You were going to tell me how Maimun's presence aboard *Sea Sprite* endangers my crew."

I blinked. What did he say? I could feel it—more bad news was on the way.

"I shall indeed, Captain," Jaide replied. "But first I must take care of something."

I heard footsteps so light it took me a moment to realize they were headed my way. I pulled back from the door just as Jaide yanked it open. She smiled, but behind her, Deudermont looked something bordering on furious. It wasn't the first time the captain had looked at me like that—and it was always hard to bear. Jaide motioned subtly away, indicating that I should leave, and at once.

"Listen, I—," I began.

"Leave," she all but growled at me.

"But I—"

"I'll not ask again," she said. But as she spoke the words aloud, I heard her voice even more clearly, whispering in my head: *This is twice you have eavesdropped on me*, her voice echoed. *Patience, dear child. All will be revealed in due time.*

I rolled my eyes and turned away.

*Don't be rude*, she said without speaking.

*Why not?* I replied mentally. *You knew I was there, but you said nothing. You let me waste my time, but you won't let me hear why you think Captain Deudermont should be afraid of me—not that I don't know full well that what gives me luck takes it from those around me. Why am I always a danger to everyone who—?*

*I saw no harm in letting you hear a story you knew.* By this time she had shut the door and I could hear her real voice beginning her tale inside the cabin. But she didn't break off the mental link. *Go see to Haze. She'll be happy to see you.*

*Unlike you, apparently,* I answered, but Jaide didn't respond.

Not sure if she'd even received my last communication, I walked away, however reluctantly. Had I'd gotten the last word or not, and what new danger was coming *Sea Spite's* way because of me?

I found Haze standing on the forward deck of the ship, holding steady against the bucking of the waves. She turned her head to look at me as I approached and she nickered

softly in recognition. Joen, who was busily grooming the beautiful mare, didn't even bother to look up.

I put my hand on Haze's muscular neck, gently stroking her soft hair. It was so sleek with the dampness of the foggy night. She seemed to appreciate my touch, but she wanted more. Half a step brought her body against mine, nearly knocking me from my feet. She wasn't trying to hurt me, she was trying to hug me, the way horses do. I gladly accepted, wrapping my arms around her.

"Listen, I have to ask you something," I said to Joen.

She didn't answer, and I hesitated.

"I can tell you don't like her," I said.

She looked at me, puzzled. "Oi, why wouldn't I like the horse?" she asked.

"No, I meant Jaide."

She scowled. "You came to tell me I don't like the elf?"

"You've been angry with me from the moment she appeared," I said. "Either you don't like her, or I've done something wrong. Or both."

I felt something sharp against my arm—Joen's brush. "You're in my way," she said, roughly prodding with the sharp-bristled thing until I pulled back.

She went back to her grooming, running the brush through Haze's fine mane, though the hair wasn't tangled at all. It was not a horse brush—there wasn't one anywhere to be found on the ship, after all. It must have been Joen's own personal brush, though where she'd gotten it I had no idea. Had she found time to recover it from the wreck of *Lady Luck*? Joen had been one of Chrysaor's crew and their ship, *Lady Luck*, had been lost on the shores of the Moonshaes, in the same crash that had almost scuttled *Sea Sprite* for good. Our ship had survived, but the pirate ship had not been so lucky, in spite of its name.

That she'd use her own brush to groom the horse seemed fitting to me somehow, particularly given the loving manner in which she performed the task.

Too loving and intent, maybe. I got the feeling that Joen fell into her work to distract her from something else, something not so good.

“Have you met Jaide before?” I asked.

Jaide had lived in seclusion in her temple, and though for exactly how long, I was uncertain. I assumed it had been some time. But I didn’t know enough of Joen’s history to be certain she hadn’t somehow met the elf during her time in Baldur’s Gate.

Joen shook her head.

“She’s a priestess,” I said. “She was a friend of Perrault and Alviss, and—”

“Did I ask?” she snapped, scowling at me.

I returned her sour look with a glare. “Did I do something to make you angry?” I asked.

She shook her head again.

“Then why are you yelling at me?”

“I don’t know, eh?” She hesitated a moment before continuing. “There’s just something about her, you know?” She shook her head again, mad—at herself, it seemed—and confused. “I guess I just thought we would see some of the world, you and I, and leave all this Tymora business behind us. But she came here for you, didn’t she? It’s still all about that stone.”

“Jaide’s a friend,” I told her. “And the stone has got to be destroyed.”

“Oi, I see how it is.” I thought for a fleeting moment that I detected a hint of jealousy in her voice, but that didn’t make sense. “She’s a friend to you.” Something about the way she said the word “friend” made it sound like an insult.

“And so are you,” I said.

Joen didn’t answer at first. She went back to gently brushing Haze’s hair.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Joen said after a moment.

“She’s an elf. They’re all beautiful,” I replied.

Joen looked up at me, rolling her eyes. "I meant the horse."

"Oh. Um, yeah, she's really pretty. Especially her eyes." I cringed, and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. Haze's pale orbs were something to behold, but they had nothing on the emeralds flashing from beneath Joen's tousled hair. "Like yours."

Joen took the compliment with a smile, the first smile on her I'd seen since Jaide's arrival. Again Joen quickly turned back to the horse, running the brush gently through her mane.

I stayed with Joen and Haze for a long while, gently patting the mare. Neither Joen nor I said another word, and the events of the day played through my head—most especially the moment before Haze and Jaide had appeared, as the fog was rolling in, hoofbeats on the wind, when I had shared a kiss with this pretty girl. It had been unexpected and awkward, at once too long and far too short. Perfectly imperfect, it stuck in my head, replayed over and over again. I wanted nothing more than to rush over and embrace Joen, to kiss her again, but at the same time I was petrified at the thought of it. She had essentially ambushed me, caught me off guard. Given any time to think about it beforehand, I never would have been able to muster the guts to approach her, let alone kiss her.

Joen kept her focus on the horse, but tossed me the occasional glance. I could see her coldness from earlier fading, the light returning to her eyes. But after one such glance, her gaze stopped, held. Her eyes narrowed and her expression dropped into a scowl. Without a word, she turned and stormed away.

"She's yours now, you know," said a voice—Jaide—from behind me. It took me a long moment to realize which "she" Jaide was talking about, and my face flushed red when I realized the road my confused thoughts had wandered down.

"But won't you need her to get ... wherever it is you're going?" I asked.

"I'm not far now," she replied. Something about her tone, her smile, or her posture seemed wrong to me. I felt for sure she wasn't telling me the truth, or at least not the whole truth. Asbeel was dead. What had changed to bring Jaide all the way out here? The horse was surely tired from the run, though she didn't show it. It was the farthest I'd heard of Haze traveling out to sea, and if Jaide hadn't found the ship in the wide, cold sea, they both could well have died.

"Listen," I said. "I need to ask you something."

"Not right now, Maimun," Jaide replied.

"Stop doing that!" I said, getting angry.

"Doing what?"

"Evading my questions!" I realized as soon as I said it that I had made a mistake. "I mean, not you, specifically. You know. People in general. No one wants to answer my questions today."

Jaide laughed. "No one ever wants to answer questions, child, especially questions as difficult as the one you wish to ask me."

"I need your help, your advice."

"I cannot advise, but I have come to help."

"I need—"

"I know what you need, and what you will need in the days ahead. So I have brought Haze for you. Trust in her. She will not fail you."

"That's all?" I asked. "You came all the way out here just to deliver this horse to me? So I could ride her—where?"

"I rode all the way out here to deliver a horse," she answered with a cryptic smile. "And you know what you need to do, and you know you can't do it out here on this ship. You'll need magic, Maimun. Powerful magic."

Something made me think, just then, of the last time I had seen the dark elf Drizzt. He had told me the name of a wizard who he thought might be able to help me: Malchor



Harpell. I was about to ask Jaide about that, but before I could, she said, "Now I must be off. I have my own business to attend to."

And before I could ask anything more, Jaide's smile stopped me cold. She stepped onto the rail and stood tall, graceful, her hair blowing in the wind. A mighty gust blew, and Jaide leaped into the air, her white gown catching the wind and billowing like a sail, her beautiful form drifting out to sea. The gust continued, powerful wind blowing both west and south, straining the already damaged rigging of the ship. Jaide rode the wind like a gull, soaring fast and far across the tops of the waves.

Then, as suddenly as the wind had blown in, it stopped, and she was gone.

## ***CHAPTER TWO***

For three days there had not been a breath of wind. Captain Deudermont had managed to keep the crew members at their posts the whole time, a testament to his reputation and stature, given the troubling circumstances.

The air had seemed to grow colder each day, and each morning we awoke to find the ship covered in ice, which had presented great challenges and greater danger. The ice had needed to be smashed and chipped and tossed overboard, else its staggering weight would have threatened to bring the whole ship down. Worse, as our ship had only recently been repaired, moisture kept getting into the imperfectly sealed boards of the deck and hull. When it had frozen there, it expanded, pushing the boards farther and farther apart, further degrading *Sea Sprite's* seaworthiness. How she had creaked and groaned in protests those cold days, as if she were in pain. And given the damage *Sea Sprite* had taken in the collision with *Lady Luck*, she probably had been! I had remained in awe that the ship was still afloat at all after having had her mast torn so, taking pieces of deck with it.

To make matters even more miserable, we had lost much of our supplies in the initial wreck. We now carried twice as many people as when we'd set out from Waterdeep, what with *Lady Luck's* crew aboard.

It was that fact that the crew seemed most unhappy about. There could never be a mutiny on Captain Deudermont's ship. The crew knew all too well that none among them could sail her better. And this crew was wise and experienced, and surely wouldn't blame their beloved captain for the failure of the wind, especially not when we'd just escaped an island wherein resided a group of druids who claimed to control the weather. Most of the muttering those long days had been about those druids, rumors and speculation that they were planning to starve us out until we gave back what they wanted.

That prospect frightened me greatly. I was, after all, what they wanted.

I couldn't help but think Jaide had been right, that my presence—the presence of the stone—endangered *Sea Sprite's* crew. Not druids, not pirates, but me. So what? So then, I should leave? I had Haze. I could ride off any time. Lucky for me. But what about Joen?

I had known that the longer *Sea Sprite* sat adrift, the more the crew would come to resent its pirate captives—Joen among them. I had tried time and again to talk to her, but she seemed to act as if I had already left. She had made it clear I had chosen my desire to destroy the stone over ... what? *Sea Sprite*? A life at sea?

Her?

There was more to consider than that. Jaide had told me I'd need powerful magic to destroy the stone—magic I couldn't find aboard *Sea Sprite*. But where to find that magic—Malchor Harpell? How would I find him when I knew nothing of him, save his name? Should I leave to find him? Or stay here with Joen?

Though my mind had raced with one plan after another for the last three days, I had stayed at my duties, unable to decide what to do. Since I'd been at sea, the magical cloak I inherited from Perrault had protected me from the wind and the rain, the cold of the northern seas and the baking sun of

the southern waters. But no longer. My watches in the crow's nest had been hours spent freezing, the deepest of chills that had numbed my fingers and toes in heartbeats and had settled deep into my bones. It would then have taken several hours in the relative warmth belowdecks to drive that cold from me, and somehow I had felt that each time it had taken longer to recover, and that my fingers and toes had permanently lost just a little more feeling.

I still wore the cloak, though its perfect blue had been marred by a great red scar. The amazing magical cloak had stopped the breath of a dragon, had protected me so fully I hadn't even quite realized what had happened—until I'd happened to glance at the cloak and the scar, and the destruction the breath had wrought.

I carried also a new addition to my kit: a sword. The saber had belonged to one of the pirate crew who'd fallen in battle. It was a simple thing, a long thin sword that curved slightly at the end, and it was in size and shape similar to my old sword, except that lost magical weapon disguised itself as a stiletto, making it far easier to carry around. I constantly found the new blade, which was nearly half my height, tangled in a line, or in my legs, or in someone else's. My old blade was much lighter, even in its sword form, than this hunk of beaten steel.

And that old sword, sorely missed, could burst into magical blue flame at my mental command.

But alas, that sword had been lost to me, embedded in the flesh of the demon Asbeel, who was somewhere at the bottom of the vast ocean by now. I could lament not having the sword, of course, but I surely didn't lament the manner in which I had lost it. It had been beyond fitting that Perrault's sword would claim but one life while in my possession, and that life would be of the beast who had mortally wounded him so long ago.

So long ago—just this past midsummer, less than a year past.

And so it was that I descended from the crow's nest in the evening of the fourth day, lost in my quiet contemplations, rubbing my fingers in a futile attempt to restore circulation, trying not to trip over my own sword.

I caught up to Joen belowdecks, just as she descended the ladder into the hold.

"Hold up," I called, hopping down the ladder three rungs at a time. My showing off backfired, though, when my numbed feet missed the third-to-bottom rung and I dropped the last few feet, landing ungracefully on my rump. I jumped back up and resisted the urge to rub my aching behind, trying to save some face, but I knew by Joen's look that I had failed.

"Ladder's slippery when it's wet, eh?" Joen said, that familiar edge of sarcasm in her voice.

"It's not wet," I said before I realized what that would imply.

"So you're just a drunkard without a drink, then." Joen chortled loudly, turned, and walked across the almost empty hold. I could see immediately where she was heading: in one corner, a pile of crates and a few blankets formed a makeshift fort.

"Arranged a cabin for yourself, I see," I joked, but she didn't laugh.

"Wind hasn't been blowing much since we cleared the island, eh?" She crouched low, sat down on the deck, and slid herself effortlessly into the rickety construction.

"That can't last forever," I said, approaching the fort's entrance. I moved to follow her, but she glared at me from within.

"Oi, room for just one, an' I'm the one, eh?" She pulled a stained old remnant of a sail over her makeshift cabin, closing herself inside.

"Gods, what's eating you?" I said, maybe a bit too harshly.

"Go away, eh?" she replied, her voice muffled behind the canvas.

I took a few steps back toward the ladder, but stopped short. “No,” I said.

Joen didn’t answer.

I raised my voice. “No!”

Again, no answer.

I went back to her little hut. “I won’t go away. Not this time.”

“Oi!” she yelled, sliding out from behind the canvas and rising quickly to her feet. “You’ll go away or I’ll make you go away, eh?” She rushed forward, finger leading, ready to poke me in the chest.

At the last moment, I noticed a glint of steel in her hand. She led not with her finger, but with one of her daggers.

I stumbled back, shocked, nearly tripping over my own feet. I searched for words, for something to say to stop her maddened rush, but only a frightened yelp escaped my lips. I scrambled back, back, Joen’s dagger dancing a few inches from my chest, shadowing my every move.

I crashed hard into the ladder, knocking the air from my lungs. The dagger rushed forward, coming to rest in the hollow of my chest. I half expected Joen to complete the thrust, to drive that finely crafted weapon into my heart. But she stayed her hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked once I’d regained some breath.

“Your mouth’s moving,” she said harshly, “but your legs should be, eh?” She pressed the dagger just a little bit harder, its fine edge creasing my tunic.

“Why—?”

“Because you ain’t listening to me!” she interrupted.

Trying to keep my voice calm, I finished my thought. “*Why* are you so angry?”

Her face twisted, and suddenly Joen’s hand held my throat. I could barely breathe, let alone speak. She pushed me upward, up the ladder. She was strong, and I had no choice but to oblige. I raised a foot up on the first rung then

the next, and Joen followed. Her arms weren't long enough to keep her hand at my throat, nor could she keep the dagger against my chest. Instead, the blade slid down the front of my tunic to my belly, then lower.

I climbed the ladder in a hurry.

The crew was highly disciplined, but three days in the doldrums had begun to wear on them. Men were at their posts, but leaned on the rail or sat on makeshift seats—empty barrels and crates—or hammocks taken from below. Only Captain Deudermont, who was at the helm, stood tall. But he barked no commands, said nothing at all. He just stared off into the distance. Beside him, the wizard Robillard sat cross-legged on a floating disk of faint blue light.

So the scene that had unfolded at middeck—me scrambling out from the hold, followed by the yellow-haired pirate girl brandishing a dagger—had surely stood out. But still, no one seemed to take any heed.

“What is it about Jaide that—,” I started to ask.

“It's not about her,” Joen said as she emerged onto the middeck. She still had her dagger, but she didn't press the attack this time. “The wind died when she got here, and I don't even know her, eh?”

“The wind died when she left.”

“Oi, then maybe I'm angry she left!”

“I thought you said it wasn't about her.”

“It's not about your elf woman!” Joen was practically yelling. “It's about the wind! You and that stone of yours ... You can ride out of here any time you like, leaving bad luck behind for us. See there, see the empty sails?” She pointed her dagger at the mainsail, raised to full but slack in the still air. “Soon we'll run out of food, eh? And our bellies will be empty as that bloody sail.”

“What would you have me do about it?”

“What, you mean you can't make the wind blow?” she shouted, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. “Why are you

even here anymore? I thought your elf priestess gave you new orders. I thought you were done with m—”

She looked as if she wanted to continue, but a sudden commotion on the deck interrupted her.

The sailors had suddenly stood up, stood straight. And they were all staring, but not at us. I followed the gaze of the nearest man up to the mainsail.

The canvas rippled with the last breath of a gust of wind. We all stared for a few long moments, but another gust didn't follow.

Joen's whisper broke the silence. “Did you do that?”

“I think *you* did,” I whispered back.

“Oi, I didn't do nothing!” she said. “I just said, ‘You can't make the wind blow?’ ”

We looked up at the sail, but nothing happened.

She raised her dagger again, blade pointing at the sail. A gust of wind rose up around her, tousling her short blonde hair, filling the sail. The dagger slipped from her hand, dropped, spinning over once before digging point first into the wood. The fine blade cut deep into the deck, sinking nearly halfway down the eight-inch blade. I stared at it for a moment, trying to make sense of it. Not even a magical dagger should have slid so deeply into *Sea Sprite's* strong planks.

Joen backed up a step, staring at the quivering dagger. I followed suit.

“That dagger,” she said softly. “I took it from the dragon.”

“I know,” I replied.

“Think it's magical, eh?”

“Looks that way.”

She paused for a moment. “God's favor, then,” she said at last, stepping forward, reaching out to take the dagger.

A hand caught her wrist before she touched the hilt. “It's not the dagger,” said Robillard.

Joen and I looked up to see both the wizard and the captain standing over us, staring at us with stern faces. I



became aware of other eyes upon us too—every set of eyes on the deck. The action had shaken the sailors from their collective stupor.

“It’s not the dagger,” said Robillard, pulling Joen’s hand up toward his narrowed eyes. “Where did you get that ring?”

“Same place I got the dagger, eh?” Joen replied. “Oi, let go, you’re hurting my arm!”

Robillard grabbed her hand and tugged at the ring. By the grimace on her face, I figured the ring didn’t want to leave her finger, but after a moment Robillard pulled it free. Joen stumbled back with a yelp, crashing against me and nearly knocking both of us to the ground. A trickle of blood dripped from her hand, from the cut on her knuckle where the wizard had torn the ring away.

“This is powerful magic, child,” Robillard said, his voice hushed. “I ask again: where did you get it?”

“I took it from a dragon,” she said. “It looked pretty, eh?”

Captain Deudermont interjected, “You stole from the dragon? Small wonder he attacked us, then. That was a foolish thing to do indeed.”

I gently patted my chest, or more particularly patted the pouch set against my chest. The bag held the magical stone I had also stolen from the dragon. Though in fairness, the stone had been mine to begin with.

“You will relinquish your daggers, young miss,” Deudermont continued, paying me no heed. “And then you will go below.”

“Hey ...,” I started to argue, but Captain Deudermont cut me off.

“And you, Mister Maimun, will take your post in the crow’s nest.” He raised his voice so that the whole crew could hear. “We have our wind.”

A cheer went up across the deck, muted and muffled at first. Then Robillard, now wearing the ring he’d taken from Joen, his eyes glittering with glee as he stared at it, waved

his hand at the sails and a billowing gust rose around him and filled the mainsail. The cheer grew louder.

## ***C*HAPTER *T*HREE**

“Land ho!” I called from the crow’s nest. “Behold the walls of Waterdeep!”

We had sailed three days under the power of Joen’s—now Robillard’s—ring before a natural wind had come up from the northwest, perfect for filling our sails on our eastward voyage. Four more days after that, the same steady north breeze chilling my bones, I finally caught sight of Waterdeep, of a safe port and perhaps a warm bed.

A commotion on the deck caught my attention. I peered down from my tiny bucket, trying to comprehend what I was seeing. All the sailors of Deudermont’s crew suddenly left their posts. About half headed toward the hold, while the other half gathered around the pirates who’d been given deck assignments for the day. The sailors moved with the precision of a trained fighting force—a trained, well-armed fighting force, I realized, as their weapons slid free of their sheaths.

“Hey!” I called down. “What’s going on down there?”

Robillard, watching events from the sterncastle, called back, “Just stay put. It’ll be over soon.”

I was already setting my feet to the top rung of the ladder as he spoke and wasn’t about to stop, but his words proved nonetheless true. By the time I set foot on the deck, the pirates on deck had been subdued, surrounded by sailors.

I headed below.

But I was, again, too late. I found the remaining pirate crew similarly rounded up and locked in the brig. The single cell was too tiny to hold even half the pirate crew, but once those captured above were brought in, surely the brig would be dangerously tight.

I scanned the captives, holding out some impossible hope that Joen had managed to elude the crew. But alas, her emerald eyes bore into me, peering back at me from the crowd.

"Maimun, I—," she started to say, but Captain Deudermont's voice cut her off.

"I did what I had to," the captain said, striding into the room.

Joen turned her gaze to Deudermont and her eyes narrowed to angry slits. "You lied to us," she said, and several others took up an echoing chorus of protest.

"A tenday in this tiny cell would have been unmerciful, and indeed might have been the last for many of you," he replied. "I have no desire to inflict such needless suffering."

"Oi, but he means 'e needed us to crack the ice and tie the sails," one pirate growled.

"I could have lawfully put you to the deeps and fed my crew far better," Deudermont reminded them.

"Ye've had to fight us first, what," said one. "Ye lying dog!"

"I have no desire to kill you, sir. Even now," Deudermont replied.

"Only to turn us over to them as will, eh?" Joen retorted.

"If you're found guilty of piracy, then yes."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. How could I have judged Captain Deudermont so badly? I took him at his word, and every indication over the last tenday was that he meant to keep that word. Until now.

"But enough of this," he said, and turned to leave, then stopped to stare down at me. "Mister Maimun, you have duties to attend."

I squared my shoulders—not an easy thing to do under the glare of Captain Deudermont. I had always thought of Deudermont as regal, kingly, deserving of respect, even when I disagreed with him. Even when he had betrayed me—or, rather, I had thought he was betraying me, though events would prove otherwise—he had always appeared in command, and it had always seemed as if he *should* be in command.

But not now. His face was pale in the meager light, and his eyes, usually so confident, looked weary. His jaw was clenched too tightly, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. He was as imposing as always, but he also looked unsure, unhappy.

I wanted to confront the captain right then and there, try to make him see the error of his ways. But there were too many people around us—crewmen and pirates—and he would never concede in front of them.

I bit my tongue and walked past him, out of the room. I could feel Joen's eyes on my back, could hear her whisper, again, "Maimun, I ..."

I found the captain alone an hour later and dared to follow him into his private quarters. I begged his pardon a dozen times before he even acknowledged my presence.



"The pirates are not your concern," he finally said to me. He sat down at his desk and did not motion to any of the comfortable chairs in the outer room of his quarters. His stare bored into me.

"N-not ... most, no," I stammered, and only in hearing my own voice did I even realize how scared I was at that moment. Until then, perhaps I hadn't considered how much I had to lose.

"Yet you come to lecture me?"

"Your pardon, Captain, but you gave them your word." There, I said it. And to my surprise, merely speaking the truth lent strength to me—strength I sorely needed in that moment. "Out in the fight, when the sails all tangled, you made a deal, and a good one, but now you're—"

"You're a young man, Maimun," Deudermont interrupted. "Is it not just to serve the common good? There is an old saying that the means do not justify the end."

I thought I understood his meaning enough to agree with that old saying, and my nodding head did just that.

"In most cases, I would agree," Deudermont explained.

There was something in his voice that rang hollow to me.

"Our situation was desperate," he went on. "For both crews. A fight would have left all your pirate friends—"

"They aren't ... all ... my friends!"

I didn't like his responding smile.

"They would *all* have died out there on the cold waters," he said. "Or, what few might have escaped the blade would have spent the rest of the time miserable in the brig—and we'd not have fed them nearly as well. Instead, they enjoyed days of hope and honest work—no small thing—and something I will tell the magistrates on their behalf."

"Right before the magistrates hang them, you mean."

"The course they chose portended harsh justice, Maimun," he said, his voice cold enough to send a chill down my spine.

"And so they'll all hang for it," I said with as much sarcasm as my lack of breath allowed.

"Not all," he said, and I found myself believing his smile, but not his words. "There is little doubt of their piracy, but only the most hardened will be hanged. And not likely your little friend."

"Who'll spend the rest of her life in a dungeon, then?"

He shrugged—shrugged!—and oh, but I could have put my clumsy saber through his heart at that moment.

"They chose their flag," he said. "What would you have me do?"

"Keep your word!"

"I cannot."

"Then let Joen go!" I blurted, and didn't even care about the desperation in my voice or the tear in my eye.

"It is not my province to make such indiscriminate decisions. I am not a magistrate."

"At sea," I argued, "the captain is judge and jury."

"Harbor, ho!" someone cried from out on the deck.

"The harbormaster has spotted us and signaled us in," Deudermont said. "We're no longer at sea. Is there anything else, Mister Maimun?"

So much had been confusing in my strange journey, my life, but nothing more so than that strange conversation with a man I had thought was one thing, but was proving to be another. To claim that we were no longer at sea? A man like Captain Deudermont did not abide, did not govern, that kind of a cheap dodge. It made no sense to me—not the breaking of his word, not that this was his plan from the beginning, and not his refusal to free Joen. What threat was she to him or to the Sword Coast? She was just a girl, a kid like me.

There was nothing more to say, though, and like a good sailor, I took my post. I would be needed in the crow's nest to help guide the ship into port. At this time of year, the ice floes had receded to the north, but the occasional berg could still drift down this far south. I would be the ship's eyes this one last time.

I had learned well never to count on anyone but myself, and if Captain Deudermont wouldn't help me, then I had to make my own way. I had the stone, I had a purpose, and I had Haze, but I was missing something—something I couldn't leave *Sea Sprite* without.

The stone had brought all this down upon me, upon us. The stone had brought Joen out to sea with Chrysaor, the genasi pirate. The stone had put Deudermont and his sailors

on Chrysaor's tail. Every event that had led to Joen's capture had been brought about by this cursed object, this weight around my chest—around my entire life. Maybe the stone had been working on Captain Deudermont, turning him back on his own word?

Maybe not, but it didn't matter. I knew what Deudermont had promised the pirates—a way back to Waterdeep in exchange for their help in restoring the ship—and I knew that their side of that bargain had been fairly delivered. I knew what was right, and I knew now what to do.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

“Hey, Tonnid, you mind helping me with something?”

The man the crew called “Tin Head” looked up from his task. He was securing some lines near the port rail, standing a few yards from the nearest sailor.

“Whaddya need, Lucky Lucky?” His voice was low and ponderous as he whispered his nickname for me.

“Look, Tin,” I said, “I don’t think I’m gonna be here much longer, and there’s something I want to give you before I go.” Tonnid and his buddy Lucky were the closest things I had to friends on this ship—besides Joen—and I hoped my bluff would make enough sense to pry him from his duties. Thankfully his assignment was nonessential, and though he could certainly catch trouble from the captain if Deudermont knew he was leaving his post, the big sailor nodded.

“I left it near my bunk,” I said, leading the way stealthily to the ladder below. A few other crewmen took note, but only in passing. They had their own duties to attend to.

The crew’s quarters belowdecks were in some disarray. The crew—those who hadn’t been on deck for the past six hours—had been celebrating the end to a successful voyage. Cards, crude bone dice, weighted clay mugs, and stale bread were scattered about on the few makeshift tables thrown together from empty crates and barrels. About the only

thing anyone had done to clean up was to blow out the candles.

I took a seat on a bunk near an abandoned card game. Tonnid sat across from me.

“Look, Tin, I’m sorry,” I began.

“You ain’t here to gimme anything, are you?” he concluded.

“No, I’m not.”

“You wanna take something.”

“You know, you aren’t as dumb as people think,” I said with a chuckle.

“Nope, I ain’t. But I don’t mind ‘em thinkin’ it.” He rose slowly. “But I can’t just give you the key, y’know.”

There it was. In that moment, in that admission, I knew that I wasn’t the only one angry about Captain Deudermont’s betrayal. Many of the crew of *Sea Sprite* had served aboard pirate ships as well, and in the long and dangerous days at sea, friendships had been forged between the crews. We had all worked for the common good, after all. These sailors knew redemption, and since a man’s word was about the only thing a sailor had to hold onto during the trying days at sea, Deudermont’s betrayal had stung them profoundly.

“I’m sorry, Tonnid,” I said again. I stood and snatched one of the weighted clay mugs, still filled with a bit of ale, from the table. I leaped at Tonnid, swinging the mug at his head. The man, much larger than I, didn’t even flinch. He bowed his head, catching the mug full in the brow.

Tonnid tumbled over backward, landing heavily, but on a bunk. Not that the ship’s bunks were particularly soft, but anything was better than the hard wooden deck.

I went to the fallen man. He was still breathing, but out cold. His face was twisted somewhere between a grimace and a smile. I could see that his injury was superficial—I wasn’t even certain if I had truly knocked him unconscious.

I grabbed the key ring hanging from his belt. Half a dozen keys of various shapes and sizes jangled on a large iron ring.

"Probably should have asked you which one it was," I lamented. I checked one last time to make sure he wasn't seriously hurt, then I sprinted off to the brig.

Two sailors guarded the prisoners. I knew neither of them particularly well, but they hardly looked surprised to see me.

"Captain wants me to relieve you," I said, facing the taller of the two, a man named Wart.

"No, he doesn't," Wart replied.

"He said we hold the brig till he comes himself," said the other, a toad-faced man called Vil.

"Which means, he didn't send you," said Wart.

"And that means you shouldn't be here."

"So why don't you just turn 'round and go away?"

Each followed the other's thoughts easily. They were friends and had probably fought together as effectively as they conversed.

But I had no choice.

The two flanked a wooden door beyond which was a small antechamber with the iron-barred cell that held the pirates—and Joen.

I rushed to my right, toward Vil, trying to snap my sword from its sheath as I went. But I was unaccustomed to the longer blade of my saber. It wasn't all the way out of its sheath when I reached the sailor, so I settled for throwing my shoulder into him, hoping to shove him aside in a moment of surprise.

But he was much stronger than I, and even with my momentum I barely moved him.

I fell back a step as Wart approached. He and his companion drew cutlasses. I finally got my saber free, and fell into a defensive stance. Two against one, and they were both bigger, stronger, and probably better trained than I.

But I had to get through that door.

I skipped away from Vil, closing the distance to Wart in a single stride, and lashed out with my blade. One, two, three times my sword cut through the air, but each time Wart's cutlass parried cleanly. He made no attempt to retaliate, but neither did he give ground. He was waiting for his friend to engage.

I darted back a step, pivoted, and brought my sword around in a wicked cut aimed for Vil's head. He had followed, as I figured, and my aim was true. But like his friend he was ready for the attack, and his sword stopped my own.

My attack had left my back exposed, an opportunity Wart didn't ignore. He stepped up, chopping his sword down at my head. I dived aside to my left, barely missing the blade. My own sword came up just in time to pick off Vil's attack, a horizontal slice from his right—directly against the momentum of my dodge.

By sheer luck, my blade stopped his, but the force of the blow made my arm tingle.

I had no time to recover as Wart cut in, his blade swinging at my shoulder. I couldn't bring my sword around fast enough to stop it, so I brought my empty hand up instead, hoping somehow to deflect the attack.

But my hand wasn't empty. It held Tonnid's key ring, gripped firmly in my fist, the iron circle across my knuckles.

The sword bit deep into the iron, nearly cutting through, but the ring held. I slid back a step, and the two sailors followed. I slid another step, and they paced me. Then I dropped my right foot behind me, as if I were going to step back again, and they moved forward once more, swords at the ready.

But instead of stepping back, I dived forward. They weren't expecting that, and each brought his sword in close, defensively. But my target was not either of them. Instead I aimed for the space between.

I went into a diving roll right between the startled sailors. I came to my feet a stride past them and let my momentum

carry me forward beyond the reach of their swords, right into the wooden door.

I put my shoulder down and slammed into the door, hoping it wasn't locked.

Luck was with me. The door was locked, but the jam was a bit warped, having been damaged in the wreck. My shoulder stung from the impact and I couldn't keep my balance, but I slammed right through the door, bursting into the antechamber of the brig. I stumbled forward and fell unceremoniously on the floor.

The pirates, thirty strong, burst out in laughter.

I held up my hand, showing them the key ring.

The laughter stopped.

"You kill none of *Sea Sprite's* crew!" I demanded.

No one answered.

"Promise! All of you!"

A chorus of "aye" came back at me, and figuring I didn't have time to poll them all, I knew it would have to do. A thin but strong hand reached out from the cage, near the door. I tossed the key to Joen and spun around, sword at the ready, preparing to defend myself once more.

But Wart and Vil had stopped in their tracks, just on the far side of the door. Their eyes were wide, their faces pale. I took a step toward them, and they turned and ran.

Behind me, the metal door swung open with a creak, and a stampede of unwashed bodies swept over me, pushed me aside and to the ground, very nearly trampling me.

It seemed like a long time—too long—before the crowd passed, though it was likely just a few heartbeats. And once they had gone, that same strong, thin hand grasped my shoulder and pulled me to my feet.

"I didn't betray you," I said to her.

"Oi, never said ye did," Joen replied, and her smile was genuine.

Before I could say anything else, she'd turned to run, and I followed her to the ladder.

By the time we reached the deck, the ruckus was in full swing. The pirates, though unarmed, had apparently caught the crew by surprise, and they'd pushed all the way to the gangplanks. They weren't trying to fight, after all, but were simply trying to get off the ship and out along the docks. The sailors had regrouped around them and were forcing the pirates toward the planks, out onto the long wharf. But the ship wasn't fully tied off, and the rocking of the deck made the crossing difficult. For each pirate who made it to the dock, another fell into the icy water below.

But I had a different plan, a different destination. I took Joen's hand and steered her to the captain's quarters.

"Try and find—," I started.

"The captain's key?" she finished, holding up the key ring, an ornate brass key singled out from the others. "This one looks to be the fanciest. Ye think it's the one?"

"Good a guess as any."

We reached the door apparently unnoticed, and Joen inserted the key. But it didn't turn.

"Guess that ain't it, eh?" she said, pulling up another key.

"Come on," I said. "If anyone notices us, we're dead."

"Nah, if we get caught, we're fighting," she said, discarding her second attempt and pulling up a third. "We ain't dead till we get killed, you know? And we ain't nothing if we ain't tough to kill."

The third key turned with a *click*, and we pushed through into the outer room of the captain's cabin. The room was, as I'd hoped, occupied. Valuable commodities were safest in the only locked room on the ship, and a magical horse was valuable indeed.

Haze lifted her beautiful head, shaking out her white mane. She peered at me with recognition. I imagined she was smiling.

"So that's the big plan, eh?" Joen asked.

"Good one, isn't it?" I said, moving to untie the mare.

"I don't see her saddle."

"She doesn't need one. Trust me."

"I do."

I stopped and looked at her, hoping to catch her gaze, wanting to ask what she meant, wanting to ask so many questions. She had been so cold to me since we left the isle where our two ships had crashed—no, since Jaide had arrived on the ship—but here she was, saying she trusted me.

Well, I guess I had just broken her out of the brig and was saving her from a noose or a dungeon cell in Waterdeep.

"I trust you too," I said.

She gave a little laugh. "I know," she said.

She was staring right at me, so close, just as we'd been in the crow's nest a tenday earlier—just as we'd been when she'd kissed me.

I wasn't sure of much at that moment, but I was sure I wanted to kiss her again. I gathered my courage, took a deep breath, and leaned in.

But she pulled back and shook her head.

"No?" I asked past the sudden clench in my gut.

She shook her head again. "Just friends," she said. "We gotta be just friends."

"But, in the crow's nest ..."

She took a long pause, searching for an answer. "We'd just got off the island, you know? With the demon and the dragon and the druids and all that. I was just, you know, happy to be alive."

"So you're saying it was a mistake?"

"It wasn't a mistake. It was ... ooh."

" 'Ooh'?"

But she didn't answer—she wasn't looking at me. She was staring at an ornate oak chest bound in brass and trimmed in silver and gold.

"Leave it," I said.

"Can't do that. Get Haze untied."

"It's probably locked, anyway," I warned her.

She held up the brass key that had failed to open the captain's door. "Oi, I'd expect so," she said with a laugh.

I dropped what I was doing and sprinted across the room. But Joen had already put the key in the lock and turned it before I could stop her.

The top of the chest popped open. A modest sum of gold stared back at us, as well as a few sparkling gems, some pieces of parchment, and a belt with two ornate, jewel-hilted daggers.

"We can't steal from Captain Deudermont," I said.

"Oi, why not? He wanted to kill me."

I stumbled for an answer but could find none. But to my relief, Joen grabbed her daggers and nothing more.

"These are mine anyway, eh? So I ain't technically stealing. All right?"

"All right." I turned back to Haze.

"And I'm taking one of these shines," Joen said, snatching a small blue gem from the chest. "For the ring that wizard stole."

I let out a long sigh. It wasn't worth an argument.

I untied Haze then poked my head out onto the deck, looking for some sign of pursuit. But no one seemed to notice me. They were all preoccupied with the melee raging across the deck. I took Haze by the mane and led her out onto the deck, Joen at her heels.

"Maimun!" a stern voice roared across the deck at me.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up and my knees actually started shaking. It was Captain Deudermont.

"Just get on!" Joen said, her voice cracking a little.

"Maimun!" Deudermont shouted again. "Hold right there, boy! Is this your d—"

*Whumph!*

Now I had to turn and look at him. The captain had been knocked on his rump by one of the pirates, and though the captain was red faced with anger and embarrassment, he was unhurt. The pirate who'd knocked him down got one of



the captain's boots between his legs, a boot that lifted him right up and over the rail.

The situation wasn't much better for the rest of the pirate crew. As Joen tried to pull me up onto Haze's back, I watched the last group turn and try to cross the gangplank. But as soon as the last of them set foot on it, the whole thing simply vanished into thin air, and the pirates plummeted out of sight. I looked up to the sterncastle, directly above me, where Robillard stood laughing. He looked down, reached out, and helped the blustering captain to his feet.

I looked back at the gangplank and saw a magical net—woven strands of blue energy—rising of its own accord up over the rail and onto the deck. Nearly a score of pirates was tangled among the web.

The remaining dozen were on the long wharf, but the end was sealed off by armed and armored Waterdhavian guards. They had no place left to run.

"Oi, you have a plan, yeah?" Joen said. "Cuz if ye don't, we're next."

As if on cue, I heard Captain Deudermont say, "Robillard, the boy!"

"Of course," I replied, and hopped up on Haze's back, behind Joen.

I reached my arms around her and grasped Haze's mane. The horse apparently didn't need my guidance. She saw her escape route as clearly as I did.

In three strides, she was at full speed. In four, she was at the starboard rail—the seaward rail. Then she was airborne, Joen and I clinging for our lives. Something bright and cold and made of greenish-yellow light flashed just over our heads—something conjured by the wizard Robillard.

Haze fell below the arc of the wizard's spell but didn't splash into the water below. She landed with a jolt that almost knocked Joen and me off her back, but her hooves barely left an impression on the water. As the magical creature ran out a few yards then turned left toward the

eastern edges of Waterdeep Harbor, I heard Captain Deudermont call my name one more time, but no more spells were cast our way.

I glanced back at *Sea Sprite*, the ship that had been the nearest thing to a home for me for the past months. Some of the crew lined the rail and I imagined they were bidding me a fond farewell—and maybe a few of them were—but in all likelihood, most of them were cursing me and all the trouble I'd brought.

I could hardly fault them for that.

And standing tall above them, his fine hat clinging to his head despite the wind, stood the captain. He didn't look as angry as I'd expected. From a distance, I couldn't see any rage in his burning eyes.

Only disappointment.

## ***CHAPTER FIVE***

A few long months ago—an eternity ago—Haze had run two days straight, full gallop, without a rest. There seemed something eternal about the horse, magical and beyond the limitations of the flesh, or so I had thought.

But as we rode toward the imposing structure of East Torch Tower at the far southeast corner of the sprawling city, she could barely hold her gallop. By the time we rounded the sea wall and made landfall south of the city limits, she refused to run, and she was breathing hard.

Joel and I dismounted and did our best to examine the horse, but other than her obvious fatigue, Haze seemed fine. We both wondered if Robillard's spell had come closer to the animal than we'd thought. Neither of us could dismiss that the wizard might have worked some debilitating magic on the regal creature, but if that was the case, all either of us could do was hope it eventually wore off.

In some ways, though, her fatigue kept our pace slow, appearing casual to the many people who wandered the snow-lined roads on the outskirts of the great city. No one gave us a second look.

We had no provisions and traveled as quickly as we could manage. Haze needed to rest often, and we took that time to forage what bits of food we might find—berries, roots, and such, but it was always too little.

"Maybe she needs more food," Joen wondered, patting the horse's mane as we rode along a narrow dirt track.

I shrugged and replied, "Maybe. *Sea Sprite* didn't have much in her stores to offer a horse, and the grass here is still dead and frozen."

In some ways hoping we were right, in other ways fearing the beautiful horse was starving to death, we avoided the subject like we avoided the main road. But by the third long, cold, hungry day, our stomachs were rumbling loudly, and it became obvious that we needed to find a town—or at least a homestead—soon, or we'd all perish.

An early spring storm came up, cold rain blowing hard. I wrapped my formerly magical cloak as tightly as I could around the two of us. Before it had lost its magic, the cloak would have expanded to easily cover us both, but now each gust of wind pulled up its edges, threatening to throw our meager cover off entirely.

Despite her continued exhaustion, Haze trotted down the muddy road with barely a bump, every movement fluid. The same magic that allowed her to run across open water kept her from digging in too deeply in the mud. I wrapped my arms around Joen and grasped Haze's mane tightly. I ducked my head beneath the cowl of my cloak and closed my eyes.

Haze will keep the road, I trusted. She's smart.

A sharp elbow to the chest jarred me.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"Gotta stay awake, eh?" Joen said.

"No, I don't gotta," I answered.

"It's how you freeze, y'know? You fall asleep and then you don't wake up."

"I'm not about to freeze to death."

"How do I know that, eh?" Joen turned in her seat to look at me, her eyes full of concern.

"I just told you."

"Oi, but ain't that exactly what someone would say if they were freezing?" She smiled and laughed.

Smiled and laughed—out here in the increasingly wild North, in the freezing cold, starving and miserable. I looked at her, searching for some sign that she was just putting on a brave face to keep my spirits up, but her mood appeared genuine.

Another gust of wind blew in, lifting the cloak and tossing Joen's blonde locks in front of her face. Her hair was shorter than it had been when I'd first met her. Then, her wheat-colored tresses had reached most of the way down her back, but now the jagged edges where she'd taken dagger to lock barely touched her shoulders.

But the look certainly suited her, and I wanted to tell her that but I couldn't find the words.

She turned away from me, pulled the hair back from her face, and shook her head vigorously. If I weren't already soaked to the bone, the sudden wave of water her hair threw into my face might have startled me.

I retrieved the corners of my cloak, fluttering around us in the breeze, and pulled them forward, once again wrapping the tattered thing around myself and Joen. I dropped my head to her shoulder, planning to ignore her warning and take a nap.

But something off a few hundred yards up the road and a few hundred to the side caught my eye.

"Is that ...?" I began, staring into the distance.

"Torchlight," Joen said.

Though we were three days east of Waterdeep, there were still farmsteads and tilled fields, a few abandoned buildings and crumbling watchtowers, and scattered copses of bare trees. The hills looked like frozen waves, and the heavy rain was melting snow and ice and creating little fast-running streams all around us. The sound of the rain was practically deafening, and the clouds were so heavy it was almost as dark as night. The torchlight, however distant, was unmistakable.

“Could be a patrol from Waterdeep looking for us,” I said, hoping it wasn’t true.

“They wouldn’t waste their time,” Joen said, “especially in this weather.”

“Bandits, then?”

“Could be. Think they’d have some food, eh?” she chuckled.

“I doubt they’d share.”

“C’mon, it ain’t bandits. You just don’t wanna get your hopes up, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a hamlet,” she said. “But if you say, ‘It’s a hamlet’ and it ain’t, it means you got hopeful too early.”

“It could be a hamlet,” I said. “But way out there?”

“It’s a hamlet, or a farm at least, and we’re going there, eh? What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Could be an orc war party,” I joked, but even as I said it, the thought made me shiver.

“All right, sure. But what’s the *best* that could happen?”

“It could be Malchor Harpell,” I said.

“Oi, who?”

“He’s a wizard, I think. I was going to look for him last autumn, but then I found Chrysaor in Waterdee—”

Joen’s angry growl cut me off. “Chrysaor. Yeah, that’s the best case right there,” she said.

“Best?” I asked, confused.

“Chrysaor’s the one carrying that torch, and we find him, and I kill him dead, eh?” she said. The anger had left her voice as quickly as it had come, replaced with a chilling flatness.

“It’s probably just bandits,” I said, trying to change the subject.

We both laughed and Joen patted Haze on the side of her neck, teasing her in the direction of the torch. The horse turned—and stumbled. Joen and I both jerked forward, and my forehead hit the back of her head hard enough that I saw

stars and she gasped in pain. Haze's head dipped forward, and we both slid off her back for fear we'd tumbled forward over her head.

When our weight was off her, Haze seemed to feel better, but not much better.

"She's never stumbled like that before," I said.

Joen's brow was furrowed and her jaw tight as she patted her hands gently along the horse's flank. We were all dripping wet and our breath came in puffs of white steam—Haze's bigger and faster than ours.

"She needs rest," Joen said to me, then to Haze, "Don't you, my fine girl?"

I looked around and there was no other sign of life, not even an abandoned barn or a stand of evergreens that might have sheltered us. There was just that torchlight.

"Maybe you can trust in that luck of yours, eh?" Joen said, and her voice was tight, strained.

I shook my head at first, but when her face fell, I nodded instead.

Looking back at the torchlight, I said, "Whoever it is, we should try, while Haze can still walk at all."

## **CHAPTER SIX**

"I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?" I asked with a sigh.

"Not for a long time, at the least, eh?" Joen said.

The torchlight we'd seen from the road turned out not to be a torch at all, but the diffuse glow of a fire in a fireplace. The light emanated from the window of a small house that was itself part of a small collection of buildings.

It was a hamlet.

"You folks look cold an' wet," a man called out to us as we trotted into the tiny town. He seemed like a nice enough sort, with a full, busy brown beard and the sturdy wool and leather clothes of a frontier farmer.

"Well met, good sir," Joen said, sounding uncharacteristically friendly. "You know where we can get warmed up?"

"Ayuh, I do at that," the man said. "I got a warm fire and good food if ye'll come inside."

"Very kind of you to offer," I said.

"Comes with a price, though," he continued, ignoring me.

"We have no coin," I said.

"Don't have to be coin, then," the man offered.

I looked around at the tiny cluster of houses. The village was altogether only half a dozen buildings clustered close together and circled by sturdy fences. In some ways it was



almost more a fort than a town, but then we were far from any city and the reach of armed patrols. The folk out this far had to fend for themselves and had built this village—little more than a meeting place for scattered farmsteads—to keep someone, or *something*, at arm's length. Still, that fire looked warm, and I could see a stable where Haze could get some rest.

Joen nudged me, showing me the gem she'd taken from Deudermont's cabin.

I lowered my voice to a whisper and said to her, "That's worth more than a meal and a night in the stables." I shook my head then called back to the man. "What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, nothin' much. The horse'll do," He flashed a near-toothless smile.

Before I could stop her, Joen stepped away from the ailing horse. The man took a step closer, thinking she had accepted his offer. I knew better. I tried to hold her back, but lost my balance, falling unceremoniously into the mud, pulling Joen down with me.

"Oh ho, now ye'll need a bath too," the man cackled.

"Joen, put the daggers away," I whispered. "Ignore him. We'll move on."

"He wants Haze bad enough, maybe we go to sleep tonight and don't wake up in the morning, eh?" she said, her voice colder than the driving rain. "I'll give him a few good, painful memories, and then we can have all the food and warmth we need."

"We're not killers," I reminded her, "and we aren't bandits."

"Not yet, anyway."

"Joen ...," I whispered.

She looked at me for a long moment. "Fine," she said at last. "But if no one else will help, we come back and take what we need here, eh?" She took my arm.

“Agreed,” I said, pulling her to her feet. Together we turned toward the rest of the town.

We’d taken only a few steps when the man called after us. “Change your mind, did ye?”

“Oi, hold your tongue or I’ll cut it out,” Joen snapped at him.

“If I can’t have the horse, lad,” the man said with a cackle, “maybe you could leave me the lass. I could use someone to do the cookin’ and washin’ up.”

Joen stopped dead in her tracks, but before she could turn and take a step, I wrapped my arm around her waist, trying to pull her along. I managed only to tackle her once more into the mud. The man behind us cackled away.

Across the way, the door to another house swung open. A bit of light trickled out into the street—not so warm and inviting as the first man’s house, but light nonetheless. The hunched silhouette of an old woman stepped through the door.

“You dearies just ignore that old codger,” she called out to us.

“We’re lost,” Joen and I replied at the same time.

“Well, that’s a shame. Come on now. I’ve got warm food and a spare room.”

We both rose from the mud—again—and walked toward the woman. Joen cast one last deadly glare over her shoulder at the toothless man, who was still laughing wildly.

“Room’s been empty since my son left,” the woman said as we approached the quaint little cabin. “Left it ready in case he comes back to visit, but he never does. Well, I ain’t got proper stables for your horse, but I can put him in with the pigs, if you want.”

“She,” I said. “And I think she’ll be grateful for any shelter at all.”

“All right, dearie. You two can head in, leave your wet things by the fire. I’ll put your horse up and be back shortly.”

She reached up to pat Haze's strong neck, and the horse, a good judge of character, didn't shy away.



It had been so long since I'd had a warm meal, I had nearly forgotten just how good it can be. And the old woman, Tessa, proved to be a fine cook.

Dinner conversation was light, as Joen and I each had food in our mouths for the whole of the hour. I had once read that following a period of starvation, it's a bad idea to eat too much too quickly, but when presented with food after three days without, no amount of logic would keep me from stuffing my face as thoroughly as I could manage.

We did get a few words in between bites, relating only the barest essentials of our story to Tessa: we'd been sailors but had quit the crew, and now we journeyed east. And it wasn't until then that I really stopped to wonder where we were heading, after all. At first we'd just had to get away from Waterdeep, for fear that Captain Deudermont had set the Watch on us. But now ...

"And how about you, ma'am?" I asked Tessa after I'd finished chewing the last bite of my fourth plate of food. "How did you come to live out here?"

"Most of them that live in these villages were born to 'em, I expect," Tessa replied. Her voice was as warm and as welcoming as the fire dancing in her hearth. "But I was a city girl once, long ago. Lived in a place far to the south, called Baldur's Gate. You ever been that way?"

"We've both been there, aye," Joen said. "We met for the first time on a ship just out of the Gate, last summer, you remember?"

"I remember the meeting, but the ship's name escapes me," I said.

"Doesn't matter now, eh? She's at the bottom of the sea." She shot me a glance somewhere between anger and

laughter.

I winced at the memory. My mentor had called pirates on my behalf to take that ship. I had thought by now Joen would have let that go, but apparently not.

"So, why did you leave the Gate?" I asked Tessa, trying to change the subject.

"Not unlike you, I'm guessin'," she said, "I was runnin' from someone. Took my son and left the city, came to where the towns ain't even got a name. Farmers and trappers 'round here just call it 'Town.' Better place to raise a young boy, anyway, out where there's room to play and grow."

A flash of a forest entered my mind. Yes, growing up in the wilder world had been good for me. "I lived in the countryside when I was young," I said, embellishing my story a bit to make it fit. "But I longed to see the cities."

"Well, so did my son, at that!" the woman said with a laugh. "He turned his twentieth and he met a girl, and off they went to live in the city, and I've been alone since. But I bet your'n parents still live out in the country, don't they? And they're just waitin' for you to come home and visit, like a good boy should."

I winced. Apparently noticeably, as Tessa's expression dropped a bit.

Joen spoke for me. "We're both orphans," she said, her voice toneless, matter-of-fact, as though being an orphan was nothing to worry about.

"Oh, dearies, I'm sorry. And here I am bringing up memories you probably don't want to be seeing. Oh, I'm so sorry."

You're half right, I thought. Plenty of memories, but I'd rather remember than forget.

"Well, anyhow, dearies, it looks like you've had enough of my cooking for now," Tessa said after a pause.

"Yes, and it was wonderful," I said.

"Oi, delicious," Joen agreed.

“Well, thank you for saying. Now, as I said, there’s an open room and the bed’s all clean and made and ready. I expect you two could use a good long sleep, yes?”

I nodded emphatically, rising to my feet. Joen followed suit.

“Well, it’s right through there.” She motioned to one of the plain doors in the plain walls of the plain room. “I’ll just clean this up. You two can head for bed. I’ll wake you for breakfast in the morn.”

I would have helped with the cleaning, but after three long days on the road, the thought of bed was simply too enticing. Joen, I could see, agreed, based on the way she pulled her feet behind her. Usually she walked with such a light step, practically a skip.

Of course, once we got into the guest room, one more problem became obvious. There was only a single bed, and it was rather small. Joen didn’t seem to mind—or even notice. She simply moved to the bed and plopped down.

“I suppose I’ll sleep on the floor, then,” I said. “Toss me a pillow, would you?”

Joen looked at me for a moment, puzzled, then burst out laughing.

“What, you’re afraid to share a bed with a girl, eh?” she said, her voice low, mocking.

I took a little wooden carving of a horse off a shelf and turned it over in my hands, pretending to be interested in one of Tessa’s son’s childhood toys.

“I ... um ... I don’t ... What?”

“Relax, *kid*,” she said, emphasizing the last word as if she were so much older than I. “Look, it’s simple.” She took one of the pillows and laid it down the center of the bed, which was clearly delineated by the simple pattern of the homespun quilt. “This is the line. You cross the line, I’ll stab you really really hard with my daggers. You got it?”

I put the horse back on the shelf and reached for the little wooden pig next to it. “These are ...,” I said, searching for a

word, any word, "... fun."

"You shut up and go to bed already, eh?"



The storm passed in the night, and I awoke to sunlight streaming in through the bedroom window. Joen had apparently risen before me, and the room was empty, the bed warm and comfortable. I wrapped myself in the blankets and watched the morning light, which was shining through the dusty glass, trace its way across the floor ever so slowly.

The door burst open and I sat up, startled.

"Wake up, lazy," Joen said as she entered. Her hair was damp, pulled back from her face. Her clothes were clean—or, at least, cleaner than they'd been the day before.

"I'm not lazy," I said, rolling out of bed. My foot caught on a rug I hadn't noticed the previous night. The rug slipped out from under me and I stumbled, nearly crashing to the floor.

"Oi, you're clumsy, though," Joen chuckled.

I shrugged, hardly in any position to argue.

"Well, the washroom's open, eh? And Tessa's cooking breakfast."

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

"No, it really doesn't," Joen answered. "Do we have a plan?"

"Sort of," I said, moving toward the door.

But Joen stepped in front of me. "'Sort of' ain't good enough right now, eh?" she said.

"I have a name," I said. "The dark elf told me: Malchor Harpell. When we find him, I think he can help us destroy the stone."

"Oi, you mean the stone that got me free of *Sea Sprite's* brig, that made good our escape, that cold and wet as we were got us to Tessa? That's the stone you want to destroy? The one you almost killed me and my shipmates to get? I

say we follow Tymora's good fortune wherever she leads us, and—"

She was interrupted by the clatter of clay plates as Tessa set the table just outside the door. The smell of freshly cooked eggs wafted in, and my stomach rumbled a bit.

Again I moved toward the door, and again Joen stepped in front of me. "I don't want it," I told her as plainly as I could.

"And you can't toss it away, or give it away?" she asked.

"Can't you just trust me that this is important?"

"Can't you trust me enough to tell me what I'm out here risking my life for?" Joen's expression was soft, gentle. I had not seen such a look on her face often, but it seemed to fit. "Oi, didn't we just face a dragon to get the thing back?"

"I can't just toss it away," I said. "If I get too far away from it, I die."

Joen's eyes widened and she backed a step away from me. She was about to say something when there came a sharp rap on the front door of the cottage. I heard Tessa move to the door, humming a soft tune. "And this ... Malcher Horple?"

"Malchor Harpell."

"Can take care of that for you?" she asked. A look of desperation crossed her face and made my heart sink. "He can free you of it?"

"Before I found you in Waterdeep," I said, "I had a guide, a friend. He gave me that name. I don't know any more than that he might be able to help," I said, crossing to the door and pulling it open. "I have to find Malchor Harpell."

I stopped in my tracks. The front door to the house was ajar. A man had entered. He had apparently been speaking to Tessa, but now he turned to look at me.

"Well now," Chrysaor said, his voice deep, his bluish skin shining in the morning sunlight. "That's an interesting name for a child to know."

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

Always before, Joen's movements in battle had been graceful, each motion leading naturally to the next. But not this time.

All grace had left her, replaced by pure rage. She leaped forward, stabbing out with both her daggers.

I looked at Tessa. Her jaw hung open, and her face was pale.

"How do you know him?" I asked her.

"Don't, dearie," she said. "He just showed up. I was gonna ask him to join us for breakfast."

Chrysaor fell back a step, out of Joen's reach, and she pursued, step for step, withdrawing her blades and stabbing out again.

"I don't think he's here for breakfast," I said.

Joen slashed at him, a wild roundabout swing that came up short.

"No," the old lady replied. "I suppose not."

But even as Joen's dagger flashed harmlessly by, she charged in behind it, stabbing with her other hand, an awkward and off-balance movement that conveyed her blind rage.

The pirate's sword finally left its sheath. Though it was a fine metal blade, straight and narrow, it seemed almost dull in comparison to Joen's flashing daggers. Each ray of the



morning light glinted off the twin weapons, reflected a dozen times, shining as bright as the sun itself.

Chrysaor held his sword vertically, and swept it across his body, driving both of Joen's daggers to the side. She retracted, leaving an obvious opening in her defenses, but Chrysaor didn't attack, and Joen quickly righted her blades.

The blue-skinned pirate captain risked a glance my way and said, "Your friend wants me dead."

"I tend to agree with her," I answered.

"You shouldn't."

Joен jumped ahead again, and once more, Chrysaor deflected her attack. Metal rang against metal, and Chrysaor sidestepped another brutal thrust.

Joен rushed forward again, but this time Chrysaor moved to meet her. He parried one thrusting dagger, sidestepped the other, and for the first time made an attack of his own. He punched out with the pommel of his sword.

Joен didn't even begin to dodge the attack. Chrysaor's weapon collided heavily with her shoulder, sending her staggering back several steps. The genasi followed her, kicking out at her ankles, trying to trip her. She skipped back a few steps, holding her balance, but barely.

"You know," I said to Tessa, "I should probably help her."

"Might be a good idea, dearie."

I dashed into the guestroom, where my sword belt lay beside the bed. I scooped it up, strapping it to my hip as I rushed back to the battle.

By now, Joен had pushed Chrysaor back from the cottage door and out into the single muddy street around which the tiny hamlet was built. And the battle had attracted attention. Every door in town had opened, with at least one person standing in each doorway, watching in something between shock and amusement. Directly across the lane, the old man from the night before hooted and cheered—but I couldn't tell which side he was on.

"Come on, little girl," Chrysaor taunted, beckoning her to him with his free hand.

"I'm no little girl," Joen hissed, leaping forward again.

She stabbed ahead with her left dagger, but Chrysaor picked the attack off cleanly with his sword. She stepped forward, cutting across brutally with her right. He fell back a step, out of reach. Joen planted her foot, thrusting her right-hand dagger ahead. His only escape was to her left, rolling his body away from the jab.

Or, I noted, he could have come straight ahead and attacked her too-aggressive posture, using his longer blade to keep her at bay. But once again, he chose not to attack, only to defend, and I knew that he was too fine a fighter to unwittingly let so many obvious opportunities pass.

"I could have killed you as you slept, if I had a mind to kill you at all," Chrysaor said.

"If you don't want us dead," I cut in before Joen could respond, "then why are you here?"

"Ah, a question at last," he replied. "I was sent to watch you, of course. To follow you and report on your progress."

Joen continued to press her attacks, daggers cutting and thrusting, but Chrysaor was always one step ahead, his defenses always in place. Joen seemed not to have tired at all—remarkable in and of itself—but she hadn't wearied her target either.

But now I was more interested in what the genasi had to say than in trying to kill him—that had always been Joen's fight, the same way the stone was mine.

"Report to whom?" I asked him. "Your master is dead."

Chrysaor laughed. "Surely you know better than that," he said. "A demon as my master? Please."

At last, I fumbled the buckle of my sword belt closed and tried to draw my sword as I ran to Joen's side, but once again the long blade failed to come out cleanly. Instead, the dangling scabbard, moved by the withdrawing blade, tangled in my legs. In the already slippery footing of the

muddy "street," my boot slid out from under me, and I fell with a splash into the muck.

"Oi, you work for the Circle, then," Joen snarled. "You've been working for them since the start."

"Pretty," Chrysaor said with an infuriatingly smug smile, "but not so smart. I see why you like this one, kid."

Irritated by that last crack, I pulled myself up quickly, trying not to look any more foolish in the process, but no one was looking at me.

Of course they weren't. They were focused on the fight raging not a dozen feet from me.

I extracted my sword, more carefully this time, and finally took my place at Joen's side.

Joen stepped forward, her face a twisted scowl. "You shut up," she said. "You betrayed your crew and got 'em killed."

I moved around Joen, looking for an opening, for a way to help. But Chrysaor moved with me, rotating around Joen as if she were the center of a wheel, and we two were the spokes. However I moved, he kept her between us.

"I warned you all of the dangers," the pirate argued.

Joen let out a low growl, pushing ahead ever more furiously. Left, right, left her daggers cut, and one wild sidelong slash nearly clipped me as the blade came around! Chrysaor parried the first, then the second swing, and stepped back from the third, and the slash.

"Oi, 'In my employ you shall find only the greatest gain,' eh?" Joen shot back at him. "Isn't that what you said back when I joined *Lady Luck's* crew?"

Joen pressed the assault. She stabbed out with her right hand, and Chrysaor stepped back. She followed with a left. He stepped back again. She leaped forward, punching out with both daggers. Chrysaor fell into a backward roll, falling beneath the cut of her blades, and came to his feet a few strides away, a bit muddy but unharmed.

"And where did you get those fine, shining daggers, child?"

Joen hesitated.

"Took them from a dragon's hoard, isn't that right?" the genasi went on. "A dragon's hoard you never would have found had you not sailed with me?"

She charged ahead, cutting with both daggers. Chrysaor brought his sword in for the parry, but Joen's attack was a feint. She withdrew both blades, letting the sword slip harmlessly past. She brought one dagger up quickly, snapping it against Chrysaor's blade, forcing it farther out to his side. With the other, she plunged ahead.

The pirate stepped back, out of her shortened reach, and brought both hands to the handle of his sword. With a burst of strength, he shoved back against Joen's pressing dagger. He was much stronger than she, and her footing was slick. She skidded back a few feet. Joen held her balance, bringing her daggers up in a defensive cross in front of her, but Chrysaor did not press the attack.

"You led us out there," I said as Joen circled him, looking for an opening. "You wanted me to pursue you, to be captured by the druids."

"And I knew Captain Deudermont was honorable enough to give you the chance," he said with a wry smile.

I snorted at the thought. "Deudermont said no," I told him. "It was *Sea Sprite's* crew that changed his mind."

"And it doesn't excuse you using your own crew like that," Joen added.

"I need no excuses for my actions."

"Oi, I think you do, at that."

Then I saw the pirate's arm twitch—just the slightest jerk of his elbow.

"Joen, duck!" I cried out.

Her defenses weren't set. She thought of nothing but trying to kill him, unconcerned for her safety. But he had been fighting purely defensively, letting her attacks play out. He had tricked her, had goaded her into his trap.

He had tricked us both, I realized. I could have kept pace, could have been there to pick off the attack. But I wanted to hear what the pirate had to say.

The flat of Chrysaor's blade struck Joen's left ear, rolled up and over her head, and tapped her right temple. His empty left hand caught Joen's wrist and he pulled her past him. He planted a boot on the small of her back as she stumbled past. Kicking out, he launched her skidding to the ground several feet away.

"Are we done playing yet, children?" Chrysaor asked.

"I'm not playing," Joen snarled, spitting out mud.

"Not very well, at least."

Joen rose to her feet and stalked toward Chrysaor.

"I could have killed you right there," he said.

"I will kill you right now," Joen answered.

"Stop, Joen," I said. He was right. He could have killed her a long time ago. He could have killed us both, but he hadn't. He had something to say.

Joen shrugged me off but hesitated, looking for an opening in the pirate's defenses that wasn't there.

"All irrelevant, all of this," Chrysaor said, waving his arms as if to chase away the conversation. "There's a more important question you want to ask of me. There's someone you'll like to meet."

"I don't think there's—," Joen began.

"Malchor Harpell," I said, cutting her off, but lowering my voice so the villagers wouldn't hear.

Chrysaor pointed a finger to me, nodding. "And there it is. I know much of him, as most learned folk of the North should."

"We don't care," Joen cut in.

"I care," I said, and Joen glared at me.

She walked over to me and said in a whisper, "Nothing he says can be trusted. We should kill him and be done with it."

"I don't trust him," I replied. "But he buried his lie in truth last time, didn't he? He did lead you to a treasure hoard."

“Guarded by a dragon, after we were caught by a pirate hunter and wrecked in a blizzard.”

“So maybe we’ll have to fight a dragon to get to Malchor Harpell.”

“Or this wizard of yours is dead, or this time Chrysaor’s just lying and it’s a trap.”

“Or,” Chrysaor said, “my task is not to get you killed, and I have no particular reason to keep you away from Malchor Harpell, so I’ll tell you truthfully what I know.”

“I doubt that,” Joen said.

“But say it anyway,” I finished.

Chrysaor nodded. “The Harpell clan are wizards, nearly to a one,” he said. “Most of them live in the town of Longsaddle, a tenday’s ride to the northeast of here. But Malchor no longer dwells there. He instead resides in his own private tower, the Tower of Twilight.”

“And where is this tower?” I asked.

“I’ll have to show you.”

“No.” Joen spoke before I could, but my answer would have been the same.

“The tower is magically hidden. You’ll not find it without my help.”

“We’ll take our chances,” Joen said.

“No,” I cut in, my voice low, quiet. “We won’t.”

She stared at me in disbelief. “You want to take him along?”

“I want him to show us to the tower. That’s all.” I looked back at the pirate and said, “If you never served Asbeel and aren’t reporting to the Circle, who is it, then, that’s so interested in helping me find this wizard?”

The pirate smiled at me in a way that made it clear he thought I should know the answer to that.

“Elbeth,” I said before I even realized I was thinking of the woman who had raised me as her own child.

“Quite a lady,” the pirate said with a chuckle, “isn’t she?”

“Oi, you believe that?” Joen asked me, and her voice made it plain that she didn’t.

“I don’t know,” I answered, “but I need to find Malchor Harpell, so I need him.”

She scowled at me. “What if I tell you it’s him or me, then?”

“I’ll choose you,” I said without hesitation. “But please, please, don’t. I know it could be a trap. I know Malchor Harpell could be of no help. I know this pirate might be leading us into the gods alone know what. But I need to learn the truth, and I won’t find it in this one-mule hamlet.” I glanced around at Tessa and said with a shrug, “Sorry.”

“No worries, lad,” the old lady replied. “We really only do have that one mule, and you’ve given us more excitement than we’ve had since that dragon flew over in the Year of the Bloodbird.”

I looked back at Chrysaor then to Joen, and asked, “So?”

Her scowl softened a bit. After a few moments, she nodded her assent.

“We’re agreed, then,” Chrysaor said jovially. “We should be off at once, unless you have other plans.”

“Lead on,” Joen said, but she wasn’t the slightest bit happy about it.

## ***C*HAPTER *E*IGHT**

“Well, this is exciting, eh?” Joen said over the crackle of the fire and the howl of the wind. She did little to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

We had set up our camp in the midst of a small grove of pines that sheltered us from the wind still blowing hard from the north. At the edge of Neverwinter Wood, a tenday and a half’s journey north of Tessa’s village, we had finally come to the Tower of Twilight.

Or, rather, we’d come to a small pond with a tiny, empty island bordered by the grove of pines. Winter had not yet relinquished its grip here, and patches of snow dotted the area. The journey had been arduous, the road a mix of mud and snow, the wind often biting. But the sky had been bright, the clouds few, and on some days, we’d even been warm.

We had journeyed more slowly than I was used to, partly because Chrysaor had walked ahead of us—a good ways ahead, by Joen’s insistence—but partly because Haze had still seemed weak. We had stopped well before nightfall each day, and had risen after daybreak. I had said it was to avoid having to make or break camp during the cold, dark, northern spring nights, but really I had just wanted to let Haze rest. It had struck me how greatly Haze’s stamina had lessened, and I had feared that maybe the magic that had



allowed her to run so swiftly, even across water, had come at a greater price than I'd imagined.

The nights had been cold, but Tessa had given us some warm blankets before we left—they'd been her son's, and she had no longer needed them. In payment, she had requested that we visit if ever we were in the area again, a request Joen and I heartily agreed to.

But today had dawned cold, and it had stayed cold. Clouds had hovered low over the land, and the wind had blown fiercely. It had been barely past midday when Chrysaor stopped his march and had called for us to set camp here in the trees. When he had told us we'd arrived, I had laughed at first—Joen hadn't, she had simply scowled. But now, after a few hours, I came to realize the blue-skinned pirate had been serious.

"His friends ain't on time, I guess," Joen said.

"That, or he's lost his mind," I replied.

"Oi, he never had one to begin with."

I laughed as a light snow blew up on the wind—the beginnings of a late-season snowstorm. The sun, masked behind the clouds, touched the southwestern horizon.

"Nothing to do now," I said. "It's late, it's snowing, and this is as good a place to camp as any."

"No," said Chrysaor, approaching the fire, the light reflecting weirdly off his blue skin, tinting him a deep violet. "It's as good as any place under the open sky. But tonight, you will sleep in beds, I assure you. It won't be much longer now."

"Before what, eh?" Joen said. "Before your crew shows up to kill us?"

Chrysaor shook his head. "Patience is a virtue you should learn, little lady," he said with a wry grin.

"Call me 'little lady' ever again," Joen snarled, "and I'll cut you just right so you can take the nickname as your own."

It took me a moment to sort out what she meant, but when I did, I found myself turning my hips away from her and

crossing my legs.

"What do you prefer, then?" Chrysaor asked. "I've been calling you 'child,' and you've yet to protest."

"I'd prefer you not talk to me at all," she said.

The pirate nodded, bowed low, and turned back to the pond.

Or, rather, to the shimmering image floating above the pond.

As the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, the very last ray of light traced its way up an object, a tower, standing on the tiny island. Its twin spires reached skyward, twisting into the night sky, each point sparkling like starlight. The whole structure was emerald green, brilliant as Joen's eyes.

A beam of green light traced out from the base of the tower, across the pond to the near shore, forming a sort of bridge of light. I approached tentatively, Joen and Haze following. Chrysaor did not move.

"I lead no farther," he said. "I have shown you to the tower, but I have no place here."

"Why not?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"Oi, don't ask him that," Joen said. "He might change his mind."

"No, child, I will not," Chrysaor said. "But this is not my quest."

"Your quest is to follow me," I said. "But you won't follow me inside?"

"Don't worry," Chrysaor said with a laugh. "I'll be fine without you." He bowed low, sweeping off his hat. "Farewell, and good luck."

The blue pirate, the man who had twice tried to kidnap me, turned on his heel and walked away, disappearing into the grove of pines.

I stared after him for a long time. I hadn't expected that.

Joen just shrugged and walked past me to the bank of the pond and the green light.

"D'you think it's a bridge?" Joen asked.

I stepped closer to the beam of light, though looking at it made me dizzy. It was like a rainbow, but I could clearly see the ends of it—one right in front of me, the other at the foot of the strange tower.

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “We could swim across.”

“Why go to all this trouble to make us think it’s a bridge if we only end up falling in the water anyway, eh?” Joen said as she stretched out her foot, gingerly touching the light.

I reached out to pull her back, afraid of ... I don’t know what. But before I touched her, her toe touched the light. She seemed fine.

“So?” I asked. “What is it?”

She looked at me, smiled, and stepped forward. She looked quite strange, standing on a beam of light, hovering a few feet above the still water.

“C’mon, then,” she said with a smile. “Let’s see what’s here, eh?” She laughed and ran off across the bridge, then around the base of the tower and out of sight.

Haze and I followed, reaching the island just as Joen completed her lap of the structure. “No door,” she said, but she was still smiling.

“You think it’s magically hidden, maybe?” I asked.

“Oi, I sure hope so!” Joen said.

“You like magic,” I noted.

Joen nodded enthusiastically.

“A bit too much, I think,” I said, looking up at the seemingly impenetrable tower.

She scoffed and said, “Hey, this was all your idea. And besides, ain’t no such thing as liking something too much.”

“That, my dear girl,” said a voice, “is simply not true.”

A man strode out from the wall—directly through the wall, not through some concealed door—as if he were some sort of apparition, some ghost. Joen jumped a bit, startled. Her eyes went wide, her mouth dropped open, and I thought she was about to scream.

She laughed instead, a deep, heartfelt, truly joyous laugh. Something about it seemed weird to me—unlike her.

“Charming,” the man said with a mysterious smile. He stood tall, with neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper hair. His clothing was plain—simple breeches and a tunic—but it looked finely tailored and probably expensive.

“You would be Malchor Harpell,” I said. “I’m Maimun, and this is Joen. We’ve been looking for you.”

“Obviously,” he said. “Those who aren’t looking for me rarely find me. It’s one of the many benefits of living in a mystical tower, you see. The question, then, is not whether you are looking for me, it is why you are looking for me.”

Joen skipped lightly over to the tall man. “We need some help,” she said, her voice rising and falling as if in song. “Someone said you can help us, and we need some help.”

She seemed way too giddy. “Joen ...,” I started to say.

Malchor Harpell laughed. “Well, that begs two questions: what do you need help with, and who told you I could help you?”

“Drizzt Do’Urden,” I answered.

“If you need help with him, I cannot assist you,” he said, his voice suddenly darker, and Joen abruptly stopped laughing.

“No,” I said, looking at Joen, who seemed at once angry and confused. “It was Drizzt who sent us.”

“Drizzt sent you,” Joen said, blinking and rubbing her eyes. “I never met him, though. I just followed along.” She looked up at the tower, the magnificent structure rising to catch the very last rays of the sun, and the very first light of the stars, twinkling in the night sky. “Oi, but I’m glad I did!”

“Joen, what’s wrong with you?” I snapped.

She shook her head, but it was Malchor Harpell who answered, “That was me.” He winked and passed a single finger in front of Joen’s face. Joen blinked back and shook her head as though she had just awakened from a deep

sleep. "The bridge doesn't last all night, I'm afraid, and you seemed ... cautious."

"Was that some kind of sp—?" Joen started, but seemed afraid to say the word "spell." A chill ran down my spine, but Joen seemed no worse for wear.

"If Drizzt sent you," Malchor Harpell went on, "then surely you can tell me who he travels with."

"Wulfgar," I said. "A giant man of the North. And a dwarf called Bruenor, and a woman named Catti-brie. Oh, and there's a halfling, what's his name? Regis, I think."

Malchor nodded. "And what did he think I could do for you?"

"Information," I said. "About this."

I unfastened the top few buttons of my shirt, reached in and withdrew the magical stone from its pouch. It was heavy, perfectly smooth, and black. I held it up for Malchor to see.

The wizard's eyes widened.

"It's the Stone of—," I began.

"I know what it is," he said, quickly regaining his composure. "May I?" He held out his hand to take it, but I hesitated.

Malchor took a step back and waved his hand to indicate the sparkling emerald tower.

"Where are my manners?" he said. "Please, come inside and be welcome."

He reached out to the shimmering wall and traced the vague outline of a door. Even before he finished, a door appeared in the place he'd outlined, emerging into being and swinging open at the same time.

Joen stepped back one step. I stepped back two.

"A friend sent you to me," the wizard said. "If you need information, you must let me examine the object."

"You just said you know what it is," I said.

"I also know it is bound to its bearer," he replied, "so there is no point in my stealing it. As I said, if you need

information, you must trust me."

"Oi, if he wanted to just take it, he could have, you know?" Joen piped in, taking two steps toward the door. "I mean, look at this place, right? If he can make this, you think you can stop him?"

"Wise words, if a bit misguided," Malchor said. "I helped create the tower, 'tis true, but I did not make it alone. Please ..."

He motioned to the door again, and Joen brushed past me to step into the dim green light beyond, winking at me as she passed. I thought of the spell that had made her giddy and adventurous. Was she under its influence again? And if so, why wasn't I?

"You could take the stone from me any time you want to," I said, and the wizard nodded. "But you want me to hand it to you."

"I am not your enemy, young Maimun."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know many things, many things that may help you, but first...." He held out his hand.

I thought for a moment, then placed the stone in his palm.

"Good," he said. "Now, let us go in out of this chill wind and brewing storm. You can tell me your tale, and I will see if I can help you."

Malchor turned and walked back into the tower before I could finish.

I gently grabbed Haze's mane, expecting resistance from the horse, but she walked through the shimmering door ahead of me. I followed quickly.

I found myself in a mostly empty circular stone room. There were two other exits: a large wooden door and an open archway leading to a stone staircase. The door had disappeared behind me even as I stepped through it. Malchor stood at the archway and Joen skipped over to him.

"What of Haze?" I asked, finishing my previous thought.

“A fine name for a fine horse,” Malchor said. “She’ll find her own way to the stables, I think.”

“Stables?” I asked, looking around doubtfully. “The tower’s not that big.”

“It’s bigger than you think,” Malchor assured me with a sly wink.

Haze let out a soft snort and walked to the wooden doors, which swung open at her approach.

“She’ll find fresh food and a soft bed of hay awaiting her,” Malchor said. “Now, come, let us find more comfortable surroundings for ourselves.” He turned and walked to the stairs, Joen right behind him.

I followed them up what seemed a dozen sets of winding stairs, past doors open and closed, rooms and side passages, until finally we entered Malchor Harpell’s great hall. The room seemed at once huge and cozy. The table was grand, stretching a dozen yards, but there were only three chairs, all set neatly around one end of the table. Malchor took one chair, motioning for Joen and me to take the others.

“Now, you can tell me your tale in full,” he said. “And when you’re finished, we will have a meal and discuss what comes next.”



Back at the village, Tessa had set us a wonderful meal—cozy, friendly, with plenty of good food and good conversation. It had been a welcome break from a rough road.

But it paled in comparison to the feast laid out by Malchor Harpell. The meal covered only a small portion of his great table, but the food was piled high, and though we pulled hungrily from the pile, it never seemed to diminish. The whole crew of *Sea Sprite* could have eaten here without trouble until they were full to bursting.

Joel and I, for our part, stuffed ourselves. Malchor ate as well, though not nearly so much. He could feast like this every day if he wanted to, I supposed, but we travelers had eaten only dry bread and salted meats for the last ten days and a half.

Malchor kept silent throughout the meal, and neither Joel nor I took enough time between bites to say much. After what seemed hours, I pushed my chair back from the table, full and satisfied. A few moments later, Joel followed suit.

Malchor stared at us for a long while. I wondered whether he was waiting for something, waiting for me to speak up. But I had no idea what to say, so I stayed quiet.

"I can help you," Malchor said at last, taking the stone from a pocket and placing it on the table. "I do have some information and a good idea where you could find more."

"That's great," I said, beaming.

Joel put her hand on my shoulder and opened her mouth to give congratulations, but only a belch came out. Her hand shot to her mouth and she blushed, but the wizard didn't seem to notice.

"However, information is a valuable thing," he continued.

"We have no coin to pay you," I replied.

"No, but we have this, eh?" Joel said, pulling the sparkling sapphire from her pocket and placing it on the table.

"I don't care to put a merchant's price on knowledge," Malchor said. "I seek something else."

"And what is that?" I asked.

"Two things: First, trust. You've already demonstrated that by turning over the stone when I asked. But second, and more important, discipline."

I waited for him to continue, but he said nothing. "I don't understand," I said at last.

"I'll explain, then. I require first that you trust in me, that you believe I can and will help you."

"We do trust that," I said. "Drizzt trusts you, so I trust you."



“That you trust the dark elf is wise of you,” he said. “But as I said, the second price is more important.”

“Discipline,” I said. “What kind of discipline?”

“The kind of discipline it takes to resist asking that very question,” he replied.

“I’ve traveled up and down the Sword Coast, fighting all sorts of monsters. I’m bound to that stone magically. And you don’t think I deserve some information about it?”

“I don’t think you’re ready for it, no,” the wizard said. “You’re a child, Maimun, and I am deeply sorry for whatever has caused you to come into contact with an artifact of this immense importance. How it bound itself to you, at your age, is a question I will puzzle over for some time, I’m sure. Now, if you do not trust my judgment, take the stone back and leave. Otherwise, follow me.”

The wizard rose to his feet. With some difficulty, I rose too, and Joen did likewise.

“I didn’t come here to—”

The wizard turned on me and I almost choked trying to stop talking. His eyes were so cold, but when I took a deep breath, his expression warmed and he said, “Discipline,” once more.

“Discipline,” Joen repeated, and I wasn’t sure if she was making fun of me or Malchor Harpell. For her sake, I hoped it was me. The wizard didn’t even notice.

We climbed two more sets of stairs, crossed through an ornate set of double doors, and went down a long, winding, narrow passage. The whole way, no one spoke a word. The only sound was the *clomp* of our booted feet on the hard stone.

Finally we stopped at a single plain wooden door. Malchor pushed it open, revealing a large circular chamber with a low-ceiling and the walls lined with bookshelves. Two more doors, also plain wood, opened out from the room, one to the left, the other to the right. In the center of the room stood a

strange contraption that I could not identify, but that looked sort of like an ornate pillar.

“Welcome to the Martial Hall,” Malchor said, striding purposefully into the room. Joen and I followed. “Herein you will prove your discipline.”

“How?” I asked, but Malchor motioned for me to be silent.

“Maimun, please come stand over here,” Malchor said, motioning me toward one of the doors. “And you, young lady, stand on the opposite side of the room.”

We complied, and Malchor walked back to the middle of the room.

“These books contain many secrets of mental discipline and martial prowess. Meditation and sword fighting, willpower and open-hand combat—all the tools you will need to become warriors are within. And this”—he rested his hand on the odd contraption in the room’s center, a tall pillar made of several circular stone pieces stacked upon each other, each with many stone protrusions—“will be your sparring partner.”

Malchor walked from the pillar to one of the doors and continued, “The doors each lead to a small bedchamber. These will be your quarters for as long as you stay here.”

“And how long is that, eh?” Joen asked.

“Until the last snows of winter have receded and the land is in the full bloom of spring,” he replied.

“Not so long,” Joen said. “We can handle that, I think.”

“Seems long to me,” I grumbled.

“Until the land blooms ... next year,” Malchor finished.

My words caught in my throat.

“If you can stay here for a year and a month learning what I have to teach you, you might just survive what is ahead for you.” He turned to face me directly. “You must release your arrogance, your impertinence. It will only hold you back. Force your ego down into yourself, hold it at bay, and you will have proven your discipline sufficient, and I shall answer your questions.” He walked back to the threshold of the door

we'd entered from. "I have to know if you carry the stone, or if the stone carries you."

That sent a chill down my spine, but still I said, "We can't stay a year."

"Oi, why can't we?" Joen asked. "Warm beds, good food, a roof over our heads? This place is a paradise! I could stay here forever, you know?"

I looked at the wizard and asked in as low a voice as I could, hoping Joen wouldn't hear, "Are you making her say that?"

"Oi, what?" she said. She'd heard me and was not happy.

Malchor smiled and shook his head, and I believed him.

Glancing between Joen and Malchor, I could hardly find words. "But, we're going to ... we have to ..."

"To destroy the Stone of Tymora"—Malchor held up the fist-sized object—"an artifact of no minor power, and thus a task of no small difficulty." He tossed it to me, and I caught it easily. "And tell me, where do you plan to go from here?"

I pondered a moment. "I'll find Drizzt," I said finally. "He'll help me."

"Drizzt Do'Urden is currently engaged in preparations for a war," Malchor said. "He'll be too distracted with his own troubles to offer you help. I am the only one who can help you now."

I thought a long while, trying to find some alternative, some way out. But Malchor was right. This was the only place I knew to look. If I got nothing from Malchor, I would have no direction at all. And somehow, I doubted the luck imparted by the mystical artifact would aid me much in finding the means to destroy it.

After several long moments, I nodded my assent.

"It's settled then," Malchor said. Across the room from me, Joen was practically beaming. She'd never had a home at all, I realized. An orphan child, the closest thing to a home she'd ever known were those ships she'd crewed. Then again, I hadn't had a true home since my time back in the High

Forest with Elbeth, which had ended when I was but six years old.

“You’ll find clean clothes and weapons waiting for you in your bedrooms,” Malchor said. “You will not leave this room and its adjoining areas except when I gather you for meals.”

Joen’s smile disappeared in a flash.

“Discipline,” he reminded. She grimaced, but nodded.

Malchor gave a curt bow and spun on his heel. The door slammed shut behind him.

“Oi, he wasn’t serious about not being able to leave this room except for meals, was he?” Joen asked me.

It was going to be a long year.

## ***Part Two***



“So ye got yerself stuck on land fer a year?” the pirate captain asked. “Sounds like a prison sentence, yar?”

Most of the pirates had taken seats on the soft sand. Weapons had long since been put away. I perched on a rock, sitting above the crowd, speaking down to them as though I were the smallest person in the crowd. My own cutlass—rather, the one I’d stolen from one of the pirates—lay across my lap.

The only person still standing was the pirate captain himself. Despite his wooden leg, he stood tall and firm as I spoke.

“More like a boarding school,” I said.

“It could’ve been worse, then, eh?” the captain offered.

“Yeah, I could have been stuck here for a year.”

“Aye, that’d be worse by far!” he said. “It be summer now, but ye should see th’ place in th’ winter!”

“How far north are we?” I asked. “I was adrift for a while before you picked me up.”

“And asleep for a good while after that,” the pirate agreed. “The shore across the narrows, tha’ be near Neverwinter Wood. So we’re pretty near th’ same latitude as yer Tower o’ Twilight.”

“Well, I didn’t get much view of the weather that year, winter or otherwise. Actually, I didn’t get much view other than the inside of those two rooms, plus the great hall where we took our meals.”

“Aye,” the captain said, “and ye learnt all about fighting a dummy!”

The whole crew got a long and hearty laugh out of that one.

“Can I get back to my story now?” I asked finally.

“O’ course, me boy. But I’ve a fair wager I know how it ends.”



## **CHAPTER NINE**

Malchor Harpell had called them kuo-toa, but I could only think of them as a shark's worst nightmare.

They stood on two legs, like a man, and had two arms and a head, but that was where any resemblance was overwhelmed by the sheer alienness, the disturbing wrongness of the growling fish-men. Their heads were massive—way too big for their squat but sturdy bodies. Their eyes might have been a beautiful shade of blue on a human, but on them, the orbs were bulging, slimy, wet things the size of dinner plates that goggled from the creatures' green-scaled heads. Their huge mouths, in the shape of an upside down U, were so packed with bony fangs that were so long and sharp the kuo-toa couldn't close their mouths. The sound the creatures made was like water going down a drain.

"This is new," Joen said as her daggers came out of their sheaths and out to her sides, luring in the kuo-toa.

I nodded and drew my cutlass.

I think the one with the trident said something to me, but if the sound it made was a language, it was an insult to all languages everywhere.

The other one came in at Joen, and came in fast. It hadn't occurred to me that something that looked like a fish with legs could move so fast. In its green, scaly hands, it held a

dagger whose blade was rippled with deadly barbs, like a knife with needles welded to it.

“Here we go again,” I said, and slashed out to my right with my cutlass to keep the rushing creature away from Joen, just like General Gorrann had done in the last battle of the third winter campaign of the Trollflame Wars.

“Oi,” Joen exclaimed, “thanks. Trollflame Wars?”

I nodded and fended the kuo-toa, giving Joen a moment to stab down and back up at it—just like we’d read in one of Malchor Harpell’s old books.

When we’d first arrived at the Tower of Twilight, I had yearned for the road, my desire to be on with my quest overpowering. I had often tried to pry some information from the wizard, some starting point, so that we could leave this place and abandon his pointless exercises.

But the wizard had remained tight-lipped, and I got nothing useful. After a while, I had given in and had chosen instead to dive into the collection of books Malchor had left us with.

The kuo-toa with the dagger slipped back out of Joen’s attack, and I’d swear it smiled at us. That wasn’t a good sign.

I heard a crackling noise just before I smelled ozone in the suddenly heavy air of our exercise room. I sidestepped and spun back to the kuo-toa with the trident, and before I saw the lightning—if you can see it, the paladin Lord Richauld of Neverwinter wrote in his *Annals of Martial Development in the Holy Orders*, you’re already dead—I jumped. I grabbed the heavy wooden rafter above my head with my free hand and tucked my legs up under me just as a blinding bolt of twisting yellow lightning burst from the kuo-toa’s trident to smash into the wall behind me.

Growing up, I had loved my adopted father Perrault’s collection of books, both for their practical and informative value, and for the amazing stories they told. Here was much the same—books on sword-play and battle tactics often

included detailed accounts of wars and examples of theory put into practice. I would read these stories a dozen times, committing them to memory.

“It’s a lash,” Joen shouted over to me, and though the lightning bolt had spent itself against the wall, the room was still filled with an almost deafening sound: steel ringing on steel so fast and so sharply, it made my ears ring in harmony. The monster was slashing at Joen so quickly, so feverishly, I could hardly see its wicked weapon, but Joen fended it off with her twin daggers so quickly and thoroughly the kuo-toa took a step back. “And this one’s a cutter, I think.”

I nodded and dropped back to the floor, already running to close the distance to the kuo-toa lash before it could send another bolt of lightning my way.

Joen liked books about monsters—especially sea monsters. A few months ago, though, Joen had stumbled upon a tome truly after her own heart. It was a translation of a book from the Shou empires of the far east, separated into three volumes. The first was all about mental discipline, of course. The second, tales of Shou and Kozakuran warriors and their combat tactics. It often detailed battles in which small groups stood against overwhelming odds, and culminated with the tale of a warrior who stood alone against a thousand men and emerged victorious. I could have spent a year simply reading and rereading those tales detailed in the second volume.

But Joen barely skimmed those parts I found most interesting. She read and reread the third volume: a detailed manual on the martial techniques of one sect of Shou warrior-priests whose favored weapon were twin daggers.

“So I cut both my daggers down, like this, eh?” Joen said, bringing her arms down, one in front and one behind, her blades catching the kuo-toa cutter’s barbed dagger between them. “And I twist, just half a foot, back against myself,

see?" She twisted, her daggers moving subtly, and the barbed knife came right out of the monster's hands.

I batted away the lash's trident, its wicked tines still crackling with sparks of lightning. The creature kept gurgling at me, staring at me with those huge, hateful eyes.

Waiting for Joen to continue, I snuck a glance her way and was almost skewered in return. The kuo-toa lash was slipping back on its black-taloned feet, trying to get its long-shafted trident between us. If it got reach on me, I was in trouble, so I did my best to turn the creature around, attacking at its right and sidestepping to my left.

When I moved around enough to see Joen, I was surprised to see that the cutter had somehow retrieved its dagger.

"Fast little bugger," she said. "So I just anticipate its feints, eh?" She was describing a particular defense to be used against a foe with superior speed.

"Then?" I asked. Joen could never just talk straight through, she always needed me to prompt her. I figured it was her way of making sure I was paying attention because she rightly figured I was a lot less interested in her two-dagger style than she. But she had sat through my stories for so long, I felt I should humor her.

"And now I spin back the other way." She brought both her arms in tight, spinning quickly. "And I'm inside its guard!" She thrust out with both arms, her left darting out directly behind her, her right diving forward for the cutter. Her dagger pierced the scaly green skin of the kuo-toa, and I'd no doubt she would drive it right through the slimy thing. But she stopped short, holding the fast-moving fish-man in one spot. Of every part of the move, what impressed me most was her ability to so completely stop the momentum of her dagger. I always knew she was a pretty good fighter, but that level of control over her weapons revealed to me the gains she had made over our thirteen months of training.

"And now you finish it off," I said.

“Yep,” she answered, withdrawing her dagger and slashing the other around to slit the kuo-toa’s throat.

Twin bolts of lightning flashed out from the lash’s trident and I felt every hair on my body stand on end and sort of twist. My teeth clenched and my vision went all different colored blobs. I think I was still standing up. Anyway, I could see the second fork slam into Joen and send her hair out around her head in a perfect sphere, and I was awake just long enough to find it funny that her hit-by-lightning face looked just like her about-to-sneeze face.



“Impressive,” Malchor Harpell said when he was reasonably sure I was alive. I wasn’t so sure myself.

“Really?” Joen asked, and I could tell she was annoyed, but couldn’t tell if she was annoyed with me, Malchor, or the kuo-toa—which stood at attention behind the wizard.

It took us both the better part of an hour to remember how to stand up. I stood there, looking back and forth between Joen and Malchor, waiting for one of them to start yelling at me.

“I have told you that thinking too much about what you’re doing while you’re doing it,” Malchor said, “much less talking about it, can get you killed, haven’t I?”

I nodded and started to stagger away to my room, where I intended to sleep for several tendays.

“Not so fast,” Malchor said.

I stopped and turned. “Yes?”

“Do you know what the date is?”

I shrugged. “Spring?”

“The date of spring?” Joen needled me, then shook her head, blinking, and smoke came out of her hair. “It’s the day before the elventeeth of Monthember third ...”

“Close enough,” Malchor said. “The snows have gone. And with them, your time here.” He patted the kuo-toa lash on its

slimy green shoulder, and the creature faded into nothingness along with its comrade, replaced by a couple of simple chairs. "Come, sit back down."

My heart raced in my chest. I was shaking more from excitement now than electricity. Quickly I took my seat. My knees felt as though they'd packed off and moved to Waterdeep.

Joen, though, hesitated. I gave her a curious look, and she sighed and crossed the room to sit next to me.

"You have earned the information I possess," Malchor said, his tone heavy. "This last bit aside, you have proven you are capable of discipline and of trust, and you have given all that I asked. So I will keep my end of the bargain and tell you what I know. If, that is, you still desire it."

"We do," I said quickly, forcing my head to clear.

Joen didn't answer, though, and Malchor and I stared at her for a long moment before she finally nodded her assent.

"Very well. The stone you gave me is, as you said, the Stone of Tymora. It grants its wielder the boon of good luck. But such a boon, as all gifts of the gods, must come at a cost.

"As to what precisely the cost is, the legends disagree. Some say it draws luck from the world around it, that the wielder will be lucky but those who travel with him will be unlucky. Others claim it draws its power from the wielder himself, leading to an unnaturally short lifespan. Both those conflicting legends, and your own tale, seem to support both of these theories. Those who bond with the stone, as far as they are known, do tend to die young, as do those with whom they associate."

I put a hand to my chest, where the stone still rested against my heart.

"How is this lucky, exactly?" I asked.

"I, however, do not think this limited lifespan is the result of some magic draining your life-force," Malchor went on, ignoring me. "I suspect it is merely a result of possessing

something powerful. That is, possessing something others want and are willing to kill for. Good luck will only get you so far. Eventually, those who seek power at your expense will have it, and they will hurt you in the process."

Joel looked at me funny. I said, "I'm still a little woozy. If you want it, now's your chance."

She almost laughed, but shook her head and looked away instead.

"Something the legends do agree on, however," the wizard continued with hardly a pause, "is that the Stone of Tymora is not truly unique. Luck is not always for the good, and one's good luck often means another's ill fortune. Just as Tymora, goddess of good fortune, created this stone, her sister Beshaba, goddess of ill fate, crafted her own. That stone has not been seen in two centuries, and its current location is unknown."

"Two stones?" I asked. And I thought my head hurt before. My shoulders and knees shook as though I'd just been hit by another lightning bolt. Two stones?

"Tymora and Beshaba, sisters, opposites," Malchor said.

I had to think about that for a moment, and the wizard let me.

"So is the other stone bound to me as well?" I asked. "I mean, in the small things, I've always had good luck, but overall this stone seems to bring more bad than good."

"No," Malchor said. "The Stone of Beshaba is not bound to you. After the two stones were crafted, the goddesses bound each to the soul of a mortal. When that mortal should die, the stone chooses another soul to claim as its own."

"If a goddess can bind it," Joel asked, "can she unbind it?"

"Should we be praying?" I added.

The wizard smiled and shook his head. I knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"And Lady Luck found me," I sighed.

"The goddesses each claimed a newborn elf," Malchor said, "and these they bound to the stones to watch over the

wielders and to make sure that with the mortals' passings, the stones would find their way to their new chosen souls. And these elves they named the Sentinels, and to them they gifted the blessing of ageless immortality, so long as they held to their duties."

"Elbeth," I whispered, and the wizard just shrugged.

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. "That's it?" I asked after a long moment. "That's the information we had to wait a year for?"

"Oi, a year and a month," Joen corrected.

"There's more," Malchor said, blowing out a long sigh. "But again I ask, are you certain you want to hear this?"

"Yes," I snapped. "And you owe it to us to tell."

Malchor nodded. "As with all artifacts, there is a way to destroy the stone, but it is near impossible. You must have, in the same place, both stones and both Sentinels."

"Oi," Joen gasped. "Yeah, sure."

"The Sentinels themselves are the only ones who know the details of how to be rid of the stones," Malchor went on. "And as their immortality is tied to the existence of the stones, they will not be forthcoming with how to destroy them. So there it is. If you want to destroy the Stone of Tymora, you need to find the Stone of Beshaba and both Sentinels, and convince one of them to tell you how to destroy the stones."

"Great," I said. "So all we need is to find another goddess-crafted artifact stone. Where should we start looking?"

"I suggest the library at Silverymoon," Malchor said. "It has the most thorough records of events historical and magical in this part of the world, and the legends suggest the stones first appeared here in the Silver Marches. If there is any further information to be had, you will likely find it there."

"And if the library can't help us?" I asked.

Malchor only shrugged.

"And we wasted a year," I said, getting angry.



“Wasted?” Malchor asked. “Perhaps. If you cannot put down your ego, your arrogance, after all this time, then it was a year wasted indeed.”

“No,” Joen said, “we didn’t waste it. We had a roof and food and good reading and good company, eh? There’s worse ways to spend a year, you know?”

I looked at her, still angry. But I didn’t speak.

“Look, I know you wanna destroy the stone,” Joen continued. “But if we can’t find a way, or if it’s too dangerous, can’t we just live with it? Summer’s coming, and I’d like to see the world some, you know?”

“You heard him,” I said. “The wielder of the stone and those around him tend to die young. Do you want to die young?”

“Ain’t a short life full of luck better’n a long life without it?”

“A lucky life I don’t get to choose is worse than an unlucky one I do,” I retorted.

“And what about my choices, eh?” Joen asked.

“You choose whether or not to follow me.”

“Same goes for you. You could follow me.”

“Yes, but I choose to destroy the stone, whether you follow or not.”

She stared at me, and I stared back. There was anger simmering behind those emerald eyes. I could tell she wanted to hit me, and I figured I probably deserved it. But that would not deter me. I knew what I needed to do, and I intended to do it.

The silence remained unbroken while we stared at each other, unblinking.

“All right,” she whispered quietly at long last. “I’ll follow you to Silverymoon. But if we find nothing there, we give up, at least for now, eh?”

“Fine,” I agreed.

“Your horse waits downstairs,” Malchor said. “I’ve given her a light saddle, though she doesn’t need one. It makes

carrying supplies a good deal easier. She is well rested and long recovered from that enervating spell, so I'm sure you'll find the journey more pleasant. I've also provided you bedrolls, a tent, and a satchel from which you can pull food three times a day every day, of the same quality you've been eating here this past year. And though I'm sure you won't need it, I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you for your hospitality," I said, rising.

Joan rose beside me, and though the conjured kuotoa's lightning still fizzled in our skulls and we looked as though we'd been hung from the top of the tower for a month, she followed me downstairs to where Haze waited. Within an hour, we were away, riding east under the midday sun, headed for Silvermoon, and hopefully, some answers.

## ***CHAPTER TEN***

We stuck to the main road as we traveled, heading east toward Silverymoon. The road was broad and well marked, but the numerous spring storms combined with the thaw had turned it mostly to mud. That mud was creased deeply with the tracks of wagons, horses, and men—the first trade caravans of the season.

The land grew more rugged as we moved farther east. A spur of the mighty Spine of the World mountain range stretched down from the north, and though we wouldn't have to cross it, we would pass nearby. Rolling farmlands and scattered homesteads gave way to hills and forests, and morning dew became morning frost as we climbed higher. But still, each day the season moved closer to summer, the days grew longer, the midday sun a bit brighter.

We passed a few caravans on the road, mostly humans and elves. They were headed from Silverymoon, I figured, to Luskan, Waterdeep, and other points to the west. When necessary, we gave them the road, and we always offered a friendly greeting. But they had their destination and we ours, and so there was little conversation.

I expected that would be the case when on the fifteenth day, as we sat on the side of the road taking our midday meal, another caravan rolled over the next ridge. Three wagons, each pulled by two horses, slogged through the

mud. Behind them, another pair of horses walked—spares, in case any of the pulling teams were injured.

“Dwarves,” I said, pointing to the squat figures driving the teams.

Joan looked up from her venison stew—our latest hot meal pulled from Malchor’s magical satchel. She followed my gaze to the caravan, peering at the approaching wagons. As they neared, it became obvious that my guess was correct, for the wagons were filled with short, stocky people, each wearing armor of some form or another, each with a helmet atop his head and a great bushy beard of black, brown, or gray.

“Oi, I didn’t know there were dwarves around here,” Joan said.

“Sure,” I answered. “In Sundabar or Citadel Adbar, to the east past Silvermoon. But I didn’t think they’d be trading this far out.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“Well, it’s a long journey, and the roads aren’t very safe. There are spring storms, not to mention bandits, and ...”

My voice trailed off, buried beneath the sudden furious howl of two dozen small, ugly humanoids leaping up from the surrounding rocks and brush.

“Goblins,” I finished.

Before I could react, Joan was on her feet and sprinting off toward the dwarves. I stared after her, in awe of her courage. She knew little of dwarves and probably less of goblins, yet the moment danger reared its head, off she went.

I calmly walked back to where we had been resting, unfettered Haze, and climbed into her saddle. The goblin war cry had apparently also startled the horse. She was into a gallop almost before I was settled in my seat.

I overtook Joan several hundred yards from the dwarves, slowing down long enough to help her into the saddle behind me. Together we charged into the brewing melee.

The dwarves, for their part, were obviously battle seasoned and battle ready. As soon as the goblins leaped at

them, they formed into a tight square, each of the eight stocky, bearded folk protecting his neighbor with his shield, and fending off goblins with a spear, war-hammer, or axe.

The goblins were far from organized, throwing themselves wildly at the dwarves, battering away and being battered. Though they outnumbered the dwarves three to one, their initial assault was a disaster. Three goblins lay dead, the rest pushed back from the phalanx, and not a dwarf had more than a slight scratch on him.

The largest among the goblins—which wasn't saying much, as the spindly little things rarely top four feet—shouted something in a coarse, guttural tongue. He motioned to the dwarves, apparently urging his fellows to attack. But the suddenly demoralized goblins seemed hesitant. They kept glancing around, looking for an escape route, then noticed ... us.

One of the smaller goblins grabbed its boss's arm. The larger creature smacked the little whelp, turning around angrily.

I brought Haze to a trot, suddenly apprehensive.

The big goblin fixed its eyes on me, opening its mouth in a wicked grin. Again it bellowed something in its guttural tongue. This time the goblins didn't hesitate.

They turned their backs on the dwarves and ran down the road.

Directly at us.

"Oi," Joen said.

The dwarves, for their part, were no cowards. As soon as the goblins turned and fled, six of the eight dwarves leaped into pursuit. The others moved to the back of the wagons, to the tethered horses.

Joen hopped down from Haze, drawing her daggers. I followed, pulling my saber from its sheath and slapping Haze across the rump, sending her running.

"Brace yourself," I said. "The goblins are faster than the dwarves."

“Oi, but not the horses,” Joen answered. And indeed, it appeared she was right. Even in the thick mud, the horses easily outpaced the little orange-skinned humanoids.

But the goblins had a head start. The first of the ugly things reached us just as the riders overtook the last rank of goblins.

The first goblin leaped at me with abandon, spear tip leading. I brought my saber around, easily parrying its crude thrust, and rolled my blade up along the shaft. The goblin hardly even tried to slow itself, and my sword cut cleanly through its filthy leather jerkin, gashing its chest and dropping it to the ground.

But two more goblins were right behind.

I darted left, away from Joen, bringing my sword in a horizontal slash aimed at the nearest goblin’s head. This one had its sword in line for a parry and knocked my sword high. But before it could recover to attack me, its own companion slammed into its back, pushing it to the ground.

I brought my sword down from on high in a heavy chop. The newest goblin, stunned from its impact against its companion, didn’t have time to react before my sword killed it.

Joen, for her part, was a blur of motion, twirling and stabbing, quickly felling the first goblin to attack her then fending off the next three simultaneously. Our time at the Tower of Twilight had not been wasted. Her dance was fluid, perfect, mesmerizing.

But mesmerized was not something I wanted to be at that moment, as the goblin on the ground and two more charging in all lashed out at me.

I fell back, trying in vain to withdraw my sword from the dead goblin. I couldn’t move quickly enough to evade the attacks with the fouled weapon, so I let it go, choosing my life over my blade.

A sudden thunder of hoofbeats heralded the arrival of one of the dwarf riders, who had cut a bloody swath through the

goblin swarm. His horse shoved aside the two standing goblins that were attacking me. Its hoof dropped onto the prone goblin, landing with a dull thud and the crack of bone.

But the horse stumbled on the creature, throwing its rider. The black-bearded dwarf landed heavily in the mud. I feared the massive impact may have killed him, or at least knocked him out.

Instead, he was back on his feet in a flash, laughing and brandishing an axe. With one light tug, he pulled the sword out of my goblin victim and tossed my sword to me.

The other rider came in behind him from the other side, pushing goblins out of his way with his horse. A few spears reached up at him, prodding at his heavy armor, but he paid them little heed. Joen fell back from her melee, and the goblins didn't pursue. The second rider, a yellow-bearded fellow, joined us three.

The goblins hesitated, but only for a moment. Five more of theirs were dead, but they still had us outnumbered, sixteen against four.

Thrust and parry, parry and thrust. Keeping my thirteen months of training in mind, I worked furiously to hold off the savage assault. The black-bearded dwarf with the axe stood alongside me, his broad shield serving as fine protection for the both of us. Similarly, the yellow-bearded dwarf offered his aid to Joen. But after a moment of furious combat, each of us sported the nicks and cuts of battle, and while our parries and blocks were growing slower as we tired, the goblins' frenzy only seemed to build.

"Ye might want t'brace yerself," the black-bearded dwarf whispered to me. "This'll be int'restin'."

"Define 'int'restin',' " I said.

He only laughed. His companion joined him.

And so did the six heavily armored dwarves charging in from the back.

The phalanx crashed against the goblins, and the goblins crashed against us. The sheer weight of the impact shocked

me, and I was unable to hold my footing in the loose mud. I dropped flat on my back.

Desperately, I brought my sword up to fend off the inevitable goblin attack. But it never came. The force had knocked me down, but it had also scattered the goblins. Heartbeats after the reinforcements arrived, the remaining creatures were dead or scattered, and my black-bearded friend was helping me to my feet.

I was covered in mud, head to toe. Somehow, Joen seemed to have avoided even getting dirty. Her blonde hair matched that of the other dwarf rider who had come to our rescue, and she stood leaning on the dwarf's shoulder. The two of them tried, and failed, to hold back their laughter at the sight of me. In the meantime, two of the dwarves gathered their horses and rode back up to the caravan. The well-trained pack beasts had already started moving toward us, and the dwarves' wagons were rolling up before the last of the wounded goblins had even been put down.

Curious, I knelt down next to one of the dead goblins and looked over the nasty creature—nasty looking, and nasty smelling. “Bandits?” I asked the dwarves around me.

The leader of the dwarves shrugged and started poking at the goblin with his axe. “An insult to bandits, if ye ask me,” he said. But as he prodded at the goblin, I noticed it wore around its neck a little totem made of twigs and bone. Gingerly, not really wanting to touch the thing, I picked up the totem and pulled it off the length of twine it hung from.

“What’s that there?” the dwarf asked.

“Some kind of jewelry?” Joen asked.

I shook my head and answered, “Maybe a clan symbol of something.”

It was shaped like the antlers of an eight-point buck, and something about it made me shiver.

“Are you from Sundabar or Citadel Adbar?” Joen asked the dwarf leader.



“Neither, girl,” answered the black-bearded dwarf. “We be from Mithral Hall, home o’ Clan Battlehammer and good King Bruenor Battlehammer.”

“Bruenor?” I asked, momentarily forgetting the totem. “You know Bruenor?”

“*King* Bruenor,” the dwarf corrected. “An’ every dwarf in the Marches knows King Bruenor.”

“Big red beard?” I asked. “Travels with two humans and a dark elf?”

The dwarf looked at me curiously. “Few folks in the North ain’t heard them stories. Why you ask, boy?”

“I sailed with him, two autumns past,” I said. “In the southern seas between Baldur’s Gate and Memnon, then back to Waterdeep just before the winter.”

“Well, that’s int’restin’. Name’s Kongvaalar. What’re ye called?”

“My name is Maimun, and this is Beshaba,” I answered. Joen looked at me funny—they all did. “Wait,” I said, looking down at the totem I’d pulled off the dead goblin. My hand shook and I dropped it as though it were a spider about to bite me.

“My name is Joen,” Joen told the dwarves, then looked at me and said, “What’s the matter with you?”

“*Rites and Practices of the Cults of the Realms*,” I said, quoting the title of one of Malchor Harpell’s many books. “The goblins were wearing the symbol of Beshaba.” And another chill hit me when I said her name.

“Well,” Kongvaalar grunted, “they honored their goddess with their bad luck.”

Joen and I exchanged a fearful look. I was starting to have a hard time believing in coincidences. Maybe there was a reason the goblins were so quick to turn away from the dwarves when they saw us.

“Well, any friend o’ me king’s a friend o’ me own,” Kongvaalar said. “Pleasure fightin’ at yer side, but we needs

be off. Things to do, ye know.” He gave me a curt nod and turned back to his caravan.

“Wait,” I said, and the dwarf obliged. “King Bruenor’s drow companion, Drizt. Do you know him?”

“Aye, we know him.”

“Is he at Mithral Hall?” A plan formed in my head—a contingency plan, really. If we couldn’t find what we needed in Silverymoon, I would seek Drizt’s counsel. But then I remembered my promise to Joen: if Silverymoon was a bust, we’d stop looking for the time being.

“Some o’ the time, he’s there,” the dwarf answered. “But more often he’s in Silverymoon, or on the road between.”

I nodded and Kongvaalar turned and started away again.

“Oi, hold a bit,” Joen said.

“Oh fer ...,” the surly dwarf grumbled, stopping once more.

“Dwarves like shiny things, right?” asked Joen.

Kongvaalar scowled at her, and behind him, several other dwarves grumbled.

“I mean, gems and the like. Dwarves like to trade in gems, eh?”

“And yer point is?”

She reached into her pocket, withdrawing the sizeable sapphire she’d taken from the dragon’s lair.

The dwarf’s eyes went wide, just for a moment, then his face went stony again. “That ain’t worth much, girl,” he said. “Not even worth our time to stop and trade for it.”

“Then why haven’t you left yet?” I asked.

Kongvaalar’s face screwed up a bit. “Since yer friends to King Bruenor, we’ll stop ’n trade,” he said. “But it’s only semiprecious, so it ain’t worth much.”

“That’s not true,” Joen said.

Kongvaalar scowled again. “Yer callin’ me a liar?” he said, indignant.

“Oi, not really,” she answered. “Jus’ saying, this is a very valuable little shiny. You’re trying to make us think it ain’t so we’ll sell it for less than it’s worth.”

“That’s the same thing as lyin’,” Kongvaalar said, his face sour.

“Not hardly,” I interjected. “ ‘Everything is worth what its buyer will pay for it, and what its seller will sell it for,’ ” I quoted from another of Malchor’s books, penned by a famed dwarf merchant. I hoped the dwarves would catch the reference.

By the softening of Kongvaalar’s face, I figured he had. “Aye, that be true,” he said. “And you know what they say about the fool and his coin.”

“They were lucky to get together in the first place,” I finished, again quoting the old dwarven text.

“But we ain’t fools,” Joen said. “And this is no coin. Though it is worth more’n a few of them, eh?”

“Aye, that it is,” the dwarf said with a sigh. He held up a hand to the other driver of the lead wagon, who apparently had already counted out the appropriate number of gold pieces. “A hunnerd in gold,” he said, tossing a small bag to me. “That’ll last yerselves some, if ye spend it wisely.”

Joen skipped up to the wagon and handed the sapphire to the dwarf. He accepted it, but his mouth turned down in a frown. I figured he must not have wanted to pay so much for the stone, though I also figured it had probably been worth even more.

I wasn’t about to argue with this fortune, though. I peeked into the bag to see the glint of gold.



Silverymoon was not like any city I’d ever seen. It didn’t seem to be a city at all, really. Instead, it appeared as something between a city and a forest, with more than a hint of magic to complete the picture. Whereas other cities, particularly in the wealthier districts, may have tree-lined avenues, here it seemed the avenues lined the trees—roads

wound around the trees, which had probably stood since before there was a city here.

The architecture, too, seemed a natural extension of the woods—not the gabled roofs of Waterdeep or Baldur's Gate, nor the squat, square, mud-and-stone houses of Calimport or Memnon. The structures here flowed freely, rising and falling like the surrounding hills. Spires of various shapes and sizes stuck their heads skyward, mingling with the numerous trees.

The city was alive with springtime, the trees blooming, the people enjoying their first opportunity in months to be outside. People—and elves, dwarves, and halflings—wandered about, some aimless, some moving with great purpose. Commoners in plain clothes mingled with wizards in robes and soldiers in shining silver armor. They walked or rode, or floated along on magical creations, or flew on winged steeds. Usually Haze, in her magical beauty, would stand out in a city, but here, she, and we riding her, seemed a normal part of the crowd.

Once we passed the city gates—they were left open, and the guards hardly gave us a passing glance—Joel said barely a word. She was gripping my waist tightly, leaning her head back, gazing skyward at the trees and spires and flying things, taking in the beauty of the place. I envied her some, her ability and willingness to just bask, but I couldn't join her. I had my own purpose, my own task to accomplish. And my own worries.

Who had sent those goblins out after us, and who might still be stalking us? Beshaba's Sentinel? I didn't even know who that was. For all I knew, there were mad cultists around every tree trunk, just waiting for an opportunity to jump us.

Though the streets were often broad, they were always winding, and many times I had to ask directions. The citizens of this beautiful, open city were no less open themselves, and with each inquiry I received a courteous and usually helpful answer. Though it took a fair bit of time,

especially since I felt the need to examine everyone we met as closely as I could for some sign or totem of the Maid of Misfortune before I felt safe talking to them, we reached the library without any trouble.

I tried to dismount, only to find Joen still holding me tightly, strongly, keeping me firmly in place. She stared at the structure in front of us, soaking it in, admiring its beauty. And truly the great library at Silverymoon was beautiful. Unlike much of the rest of the city with its myriad of free-flowing forms, the library appeared more structured. It was square, classical, reminiscent of the temples in the walled-off Temple District in Baldur's Gate. Yet, somehow, it seemed it would fit only here in this place. Its roof was high, its windows huge, bright, and grand. Along the front marched a colonnade of tall pillars carved of perfect, unblemished marble.

Again I tried to dismount, anxious to get inside and find the information I sought. But Joen didn't seem to notice me at all.

I cleared my throat, hoping to get her attention. When that didn't work, I pinched her arm instead.

"Oi," she said, looking at me at last. "That hurt!" She punched me in the shoulder, but not very hard.

"We're here," I said.

"Oh. Good." She released her viselike grip, finally letting me dismount.

The antechamber of the library was much like the outside: classical, aged, beautiful. Doors opened left and right, and two more doors stood beyond a desk on the far wall. A woman in a silver robe sat behind the desk, several tomes splayed open before her. She looked up as we entered.

"Public rooms left and right," she said, her tone bored. "Help yourselves, and have a pleasant day." Her head dropped back to her reading.

"Public rooms?" I asked.

“That’s what I said,” she answered without raising her eyes.

“So not all the books are public?”

Now she looked up. “Of course not,” she said. “Not all information is equal, you know.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” I said. I was acutely aware of the differing value of information—after all, I’d just spent a year and more to obtain but a small piece of what I sought. And that information had basically just been a marker, pointing here. Somehow, I doubted these public rooms would prove especially useful. “How can I see the rest?”

Her expression soured. “You would need permission,” she said. “A sponsor from among those the library trusts would be your best bet.”

“I don’t know anyone in Silverymoon,” I said.

“Then you’re out of luck.”

“Well, maybe you can help me here, then,” I said. “I’m looking for information on something.”

“If it’s in the public rooms, I can help you find it,” she said.

I pondered for a long moment whether I should trust this woman, but decided I had no real choice. And after all, this was a library in one of the great cities of the North, a city with a well-earned reputation as dedicated to study, to learning. I doubted she’d have some nefarious motive.

“I’m looking for information on the Stone of Tymora,” I said.

Joen cast me a doubtful glance. Apparently she’d been thinking the same thing I had, though perhaps she’d come to a different conclusion on the wisdom of trusting the librarian.

The woman, for her part, seemed unfazed. “That’s an unusual request,” she said. “But any information on artifacts, assuming we have such information, would be in the restricted section. I’m sorry.” She once again looked down to her tomes.

At a loss, I turned and slunk out of the building. Joen followed.

"Well, we tried, eh?" she said, putting her hand on my shoulder.

"We failed," I answered. The beautiful plaza in front of the library seemed so out of place, given my foul mood.

"They might not even have anything, you know?"

"But they might, and I can't even try."

"Well, we can try to find a sponsor, then." I could tell she was just trying to cheer me up, that she didn't really think it particularly plausible, at least for now. She would rather we give up and move on.

I unfettered Haze from the post I'd tied her to outside the library. "Come," I said. "Let's find a room for the evening. We can head back west in the morning."

"Oi, you're giving up?" she asked, shocked.

"Isn't that what you want?"

"Well, um, sort of, I guess," Joen stuttered. "I mean, I want to travel and all, and I ... I don't know. I don't like seeing you so down, you know?"

I climbed onto the horse and helped Joen up behind me.

I smiled at her. "Well, then you'll be happy to know I'm not done quite yet. I want to go back to the Tower of Twilight. I bet Malchor can get us into the library."

"If he could, why didn't he send word ahead?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"Oi," Joen said after a moment. "What about that elf?"

"What elf?" I asked.

"The one who pointed you to Malchor in the first place. The dark elf."

I pulled the reins sharply, bringing Haze to a halt. Why hadn't I thought of that?

"Hey, you there, guard," I called to a passing man in silver armor.

"Move along, citizen. I'm very busy," the guard answered, continuing on his way. I kicked Haze into a slow walk beside

him.

"I'm looking for someone," I said.

"Best of luck finding him," he replied. "Or her, as the case may be."

"Do you know Drizzt Do'Urden?"

The guard stopped and stared at me. "Course," he said. "All the guards here know him. We've been told specifically to let him pass and not bother him. Only one of his kind I know gets that sort of treatment in Silverymoon."

"Is he here now?" I asked. "Is he in the city?"

"Last I heard, aye. He was visiting with the Lady."

"The Lady?" Joen asked.

"Lady Alustriel," the guard said, and he looked confused when we looked confused. "Our protector and greatest heroine, Lady Alustriel of Silverymoon? One of Mystra's blessed Chosen?"

I had indeed heard of the Chosen of the goddess of magic, nearly godlike beings themselves. Drizzt truly had powerful friends.

"Do you know where I could find him?" I asked.

"Ask around," the guard advised with a shrug. "He'll get wind of it soon enough, and find you. But a word of advice ..."

"Yes?" I asked.

"If you mean him any harm," the guard warned, "I'd give up now and save yourself a couple scimitars to the belly."



## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

We managed to find a clean stable for Haze, then set out into the glorious city in search of Drizzt. By the time night fell, we'd been kicked out of every tavern and inn in town. Almost everyone had seemed to know the drow—they knew of him, at least. But everybody had looked at us as though we were crazy or just a couple of irritating kids. The best we had gotten out of anyone was, "If I run into him, I'll let him know a couple of kids're lookin' for him." We got that about a quarter of the time. The rest of the time was more like, "Get outta here. This ain't no place for kids!"

As we wandered down a particularly dark, winding thoroughfare, Joen asked me, "Well, what now?"

"I think there's another tavern up the street here," I replied. "Maybe if we ask people going in or coming out—"

"No," she interrupted me. "I'm getting tired. We need to find someplace to sleep."

I shrugged but didn't answer. I was too busy being frustrated to be tired.

"I'd be happy to curl up in the hay next to Haze," Joen said, nudging me with her elbow.

I sighed and nodded. "I guess we can try again in the morning."

The stables were the other way, so we stopped in the empty street and turned around. When we did, we seemed

to startle a pair of men a few yards behind us on the street. They recovered quickly, but there was something about their manner that worried me, so I nudged Joen again and used my eyes to indicate the two shadowy figures. We'd both spent enough time in the rough and tumble cities of the Sword Coast to be wary of strangers on the street at night, and though we stayed calm, we were ready for anything as we passed.

The two men stopped walking and one leaned against a building. I could tell they were looking at us as we passed, and though they whispered quietly to each other, I was sure I heard one of them say, "... the stone and be done with it."

My hand went to my sword, which startled Joen. She stepped away from me and reached for her daggers. On cue, the two men threw back the heavy, black, hooded cloaks they wore and drew wicked slim-bladed daggers of their own.

"Good ears, boy," one of them said.

I brought my cutlass up to protect myself, and Joen did the same with her daggers.

"We don't want any trouble, mates," she said.

The other man smiled, showing a few missing teeth, and said, "Well, girlie, seems as trouble wants you."

I didn't recognize either of them, but their intentions were plain to both of us. When they came on, we were ready. And the closer they got, the better I could see them. The symbols of Beshaba, the goddess of bad luck, that both of them wore glinted in the dim moonlight.

"Who sent y—," I started to ask, but was cut off by a lunging stab from one of the cultists. I knocked his blade away and twisted my sword around and down in the manner of Master Kheene, author of *The Well-Tempered Bladesman*. That three-hundred-year-old advice had stood me in good stead—my blade nicked the man's hand and he hissed and stepped back, bumping into his friend enough that the second man's lunge at Joen was ruined.

Joan skipped back three quick steps and spun her daggers in her hand, faking as if to throw. Both of the cultists dodged the expected attack, but it never came. Instead, the one I'd nicked leaned in to my follow-up attack, and the tip of my cutlass plunged two inches deep into his right biceps. He shouted a word I'd never heard before, and I'd heard a lot of words like it from the sailors of the Sword Coast.

He stepped back, twisting away from me so fast he stumbled. But his friend recovered and lunged at Joan, who slipped to one side fast—but not fast enough. Though she was out of reach of the cultist's knife, the man spun in a fast and sudden kick that hit Joan on the shoulder and drove her to the street.

"Joan!" I called.

"We were to take yer stone, boy," the man I'd stabbed growled at me. "But now I think I'll have to kill you too."

By the cold look on his face, that idea didn't seem to bother him at all, and he slashed at me, running in to try to get too close to me for my cutlass to be of any use.

He succeeded, and had Malchor not drilled us for a full tenday on how to stretch our necks to one side, he would have stabbed me in the eye. Instead, he overreached and I brought my knee up between his legs.

He doubled over with a pained grunt and almost went down to one knee. I pushed against him, trying to knock him down, but he was too heavy.

"Maimun!" Joan called. When I looked up, my blood ran cold. The other man held her right wrist in his free hand and had his dagger at her throat.

"Drop 'em, little sister," the cultist said, and Joan looked at me for a cue as to what to do next.

I hesitated just long enough—barely a heartbeat—for the man I'd kneed to stand up, fast, and bowl me right over. He must have been twice as heavy as I. I grunted when I hit the cobblestones, then gasped when my cutlass clattered out of my hand.

“Now,” the man who held Joen said. The other man advanced on me with murder in his eyes, then he lay down on the ground.

I blinked. What just happened?

He screamed, but the sound stopped short, replaced by a feral growl. I blinked again, not sure what I was seeing. It was as though a mammoth shadow had materialized out of the dark night air to press the cultist to the ground.

The man holding Joen said another harsh word, one the crewmen of *Sea Sprite* used to say when Captain Deudermont wasn't around.

“Holy—!” Joen started to say, but stopped with a gasp when the man holding her wrist, holding a dagger to her throat, was yanked away from her and into the impenetrable darkness at the side of the street. There was the sound of a ruckus somewhere out in the darkness, a grunt, and a sound like a heavy bag of rice or flour dropping to the ground.

Joen stepped back from both shadows, confused and frightened, while I scrambled to my feet, backing away from the shadow that still held the cultist to the ground. It wasn't a shadow, but an immense black cat unlike anything I'd seen before.

The man had fainted, or maybe the weight of the terrifying beast that sat on him had rendered him unconscious, making him as helpless as a baby.

“Thank you, Guen,” a familiar voice sounded, echoing in the otherwise empty street.

Drizt Do'Urden emerged from the darkness as the great panther backed away and seemed to merge with the shadows.

Joen let out a startled gasp. “Dr-drow!” she stuttered. She stumbled back and landed in a roll but recovered, coming to her feet gracefully, in perfect balance, daggers in her hands.

“Hold,” I said. “He's a friend. This is Drizt.”

Joen looked at me as though she wasn't sure she should believe me.

“Please, put your blades away, young lady,” the drow said, his tone gentle but forceful enough to make it clear that he wasn’t joking around.

“Please,” I said. “He can be trusted.”

Joen shifted uncomfortably, even took another step back. She put her daggers back in their sheaths, though her hands stayed on their hilts, and a scowl remained on her face.

I moved to shake Drizzt’s hand, and he clasped my wrist firmly.

“Maimun,” Drizzt said. “I understand you’ve been looking for me.”

“People actually told you?” I puffed up a bit, excited at the prospect that I had been recognized. “I was sure they were just shining us on.”

“A youth, perhaps fourteen, riding a beautiful white mare, wearing a blue cloak,” Drizzt said. “Not the typical look for a traveler. And I must admit, I’m surprised to find you so far from the coast. I thought you’d found what you were looking for out there.”

“I’m surprised to find you again at all,” I answered. “And I did find the stone.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but I wasn’t referring to the stone. You found a place, a home with Captain Deudermont and his crew, did you not?”

I shook my head. “Captain Deudermont ...” I wanted to tell him everything that had happened, but Deudermont was Drizzt’s friend and had been before I ever met the dark elf. “I loved my time at sea, but it was never home,” I answered instead.

He nodded in understanding. As I stared into his piercing lavender eyes, I figured he understood more than I’d said—perhaps even more than I myself understood. He motioned down the street and said, “Let’s be on our way. You little friends here will be cross with us when they awaken.”

I glanced down at the unconscious cultist laying on the street, and followed Drizzt in a leisurely walk. He behaved as

though battling evil cultists in the middle of the street was a nightly occurrence. For him, I suppose, I could imagine it might be.

"Well, now you're looking for me," Drizzt said when we were far enough from the unconscious man that if he did awaken, he wouldn't hear us. "What do you need?"

"Why are you here in Silverymoon?" I asked, not yet comfortable enough to ask for his help.

"Visiting a friend. And you?"

"Your friend, she's Lady Alustriel?"

"Lady Alustriel of Silverymoon, yes. You've not met her, but you've seen her work before."

"I have?"

"Think flaming chariots. They're a specialty of hers." Drizzt and I both smiled at the memory of the first battle I'd witnessed aboard *Sea Sprite*. After all, it's not often one sees a red-bearded dwarf crash a flying chariot of fire onto the deck of a pirate ship.

"Come, my friend, you have a favor to ask. So ask it."

I blew out a long sigh and said, "I need access to the library here in Silverymoon."

"It's open to all," Drizzt replied.

"Not all of it, and what I need is in the restricted collections."

"You seek information on that artifact of yours," Drizzt guessed. "And you've already seen Malchor Harpell?"

"I want to know how to destroy it," I said, resigned.

Drizzt looked at me curiously. "Is it not an artifact of good fortune?"

"So I'm told, but it always seems to bring me bad luck," I said. "Demons and dragons and druids who tried to take it from me or to kill me for it—every bad thing that's ever happened to me has been because of this stone."

"Like our friends back there?" Drizzt said. "But what of all the good things?"

"What do you mean?"

"You grew up in the High Forest with a druid, did you not?"  
I nodded. "You remember my story," I said.

"Much of it. And you later traveled the land with a wandering bard, your mentor. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Would they have taken you under their wing if you weren't connected to the stone?"

"No," I said sharply, "because my parents never would have been murdered by someone looking for it!"

"Perhaps," Drizzt replied. "But do you regret your time in the forest or on the road?"

I hesitated. "No," I answered.

"We must take the good with the bad," he said.

"So you're saying I shouldn't destroy the stone?"

"That is not my business, as you've pointed out. But what I am saying is, think long and hard about your path. About the path you choose. Before, your road had often been chosen for you, but now you make your own way."

"I have thought long on it," I replied.

"All right, then. I'm on my way to the palace. I'll speak with Lady Alustriel, and she'll arrange that you get a look at the books you need. In the meantime, go find a place for the night and stay off the streets before more of those gentlemen, let alone demons and dragons, come looking for you again."

"Thank you," I said, shaking the dark elf's hand once more.

Drizzt offered Joen a curt nod as he departed. Her scowl had lessened somewhat, but her hands remained on the hilts of her weapons until long after he'd gone out of sight.

## ***C*HAPTER *T*WELVE**

“It should be right over here,” the librarian said. She was much friendlier the second time we’d met her. Receiving instructions from the Lady of Silverymoon to allow us in would do that to a person, I supposed.

She led us down a narrow aisle between two tall bookshelves. Whereas the library was airy and beautiful in the public areas outside, here it more resembled a dungeon. A maze of shelves, tightly packed and full of tomes and scrolls, filled chamber after chamber. There was no organization system that I could discern—though, following the surprisingly fleet-footed librarian, I didn’t have time to really try to figure it out. She seemed to know exactly where she was going, though, so Joen and I followed without question.

“And here we are,” she said, coming to a halt before an utterly nondescript bookshelf. “Everything on the stones of Tymora and Beshaba are right there.” She pointed to a group of tomes and scrolls on the seventh shelf up from the floor.

“How are we supposed to get—?” I started to ask, but the woman was already gone.

Joen and I looked at each other and shrugged.

I looked up at the shelf, which was easily fifteen feet above the floor. We searched around for a ladder, then



anything we could make into a ladder, but short of making a precarious pile of valuable tomes, we came up with nothing.

“Oi, I could climb it,” Joen offered.

“But if this thing isn’t anchored to the floor, it’ll fall right over on top of you.”

Joen shrugged that off and said, “All right, then, let’s just give up and go back to Waterdeep and see if we can sign on to a ship.”

I didn’t bother to answer that. The twinkle in her eye was enough for me.

“I’ll climb it,” I said, but before I could grab the first shelf, Joen had already clambered halfway up—and the whole bookcase started to sway.

“Oh,” she said, looking down at me with wide eyes, “this is going to be bad.”

I pushed back on the bookcase, and though I was nowhere near tall enough or strong enough, I guess I gave it just enough to set it back straight. Joen took a deep breath, then gasped when the bookcase started to gently lean in the other direction. No way could I pull it back.

“Wait! I exclaimed. I had an idea.

“Wait?” Joan asked, surprisingly calm, like the eye of a hurricane. “Are you kidding me?”

I ran as quickly as I could to the other side of the bookcase and jumped up into the first shelf. That slowed its descent just a bit and made it possible for me to clamber up a couple more until I was about as high off the floor as Joen. We couldn’t see each other, but I could hear her sigh in relief.

“Whatever you just did,” she called, “it worked.”

I quickly explained to her that we should carefully climb up the bookcase at the same speed so it stayed balanced. Joen caught on quickly enough and we used some of that discipline we picked up at the Tower of Twilight to carefully ascend the precarious bookcase.

“Here we are,” Joen said. “Now what?”

“Well,” I started, “now I can ...”

But the books we wanted were on the other side.

"I can't see them," I said.

"Yeah," Joen answered, "and too bad I'm a total drooling village idiot who can't read or anything."

That made me cringe and I apologized as she gathered up as much as she could carry and still climb. Then together we managed to get back down to the floor without being crushed. We met up again on the other side of the bookcase and I took a couple of the books from Joen.

"We can start with these, and ... um ... Do you feel that?" I said.

The floor rumbled. Joen looked around, surprised, then retreated a few steps. The librarian rounded the corner, pushing a great rolling ladder.

"Here we are," she said. "Now, the first scroll on the left up there is an ..." She spotted the books we were holding, looked up at the shelf, back down at us, then back up at the shelf.

"Thank you," Joen said, sheepish. I just kind of smiled.

"... index," the librarian went on. "It will tell you what the rest are. You can't take anything from the library. Check in with me on your way out, and please do not climb the bookshelves." She walked away before I could respond.

"Thank you!" I shouted after her, but the sound seemed muted and I wasn't sure if she'd heard me. I moved to the ladder. It was huge and bulky, but it rolled easily.

"Yeah," I said, "that'll come in handy."

"Come on," Joen said. "The sooner we get started, the sooner we can leave."



"I could spend a decade in here," I said, looking up from a scroll and gazing around the cavernous library.

"Oi, reading stories and the like, right? Sounds thrilling," Joen said.

“Yeah, it does,” I started, turning to face her. But her posture—and her tone, I then realized—did not fit with her words.

Joen’s arms were wrapped tightly around her body and her head was down, her yellow hair—long once more, as she’d not cut it in the past year—draped over her face. Her eyes darted around, barely visible under the shield of her hair, but obviously uncomfortable, nervous even.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

She looked up at me. “I’m fine,” she said. “I just ... can we be done quick here, please? This place makes me feel ... odd, you know?”

“I thought you liked books,” I said, curious. “You seemed to like Malchor’s books, anyway.”

“It ain’t the books,” she said. “It’s the place. It’s just too ... closed. I want to see the sky, eh? Feel the wind. And here it’s like, there is no sky and there never will be.” She shuddered and dropped her head again to an open book on the table in front of her.

“The sky is just above us,” I said. “Just past the ceiling.”

“Oi, I know,” she snapped. “I ain’t stupid.”

We’d found a free table and piled as many of the books and scrolls on it as we could, then just started reading. The room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, and we both spoke in hushed tones.

“It’s all in Elvish,” Joen said, frustrated. “This one too,” she added, indicating scroll after scroll. “And this one, and that one ... all of these.”

“Give them to me,” I said. “I used to read some Elvish a while back.”

“Oi, what do they say, then?”

“I said I used to read it. I haven’t had a chance to in years.”

Joen growled and slammed closed the tome she was trying to read. “If Malchor knew we were coming here next, why didn’t he teach us to read in Elvish?” she asked.

“He was too busy teaching us discipline,” I answered.

“By locking us in a room with a bunch of books on discipline, eh? Why couldn’t one of those books have been in Elvish?”

I looked to the shelves around us. They were filled to bursting with tomes and scrolls and books of various sorts. “Maybe,” I said, thinking aloud, “there’s a lexicon somewhere around here.”

“A whatsicon?” Joen asked.

“A lexicon. A book written in two languages, to translate from one to the other.”

“Oi, that’d be useful. Maybe that librarian woman has one.”

“Shhh!”

That sound startled us both. It was the librarian, staring down at us as though we were unclean things that just wiggled our way out from under a rock. I grimaced, but Joen hid a smile.

The woman handed me a little silk pouch. I only glanced away from her for a second and she was gone.

“That’s just creepy, ain’t it?” Joen whispered. “The way she does that?”

The soft silk pouch felt heavy in my hands. I could feel a single object inside, round and curved. Without hesitation, I opened the drawstring and pulled out the object: a large glass lens.

I peered through the lens, looking at Joen, expecting her to be distorted. But she looked perfectly normal. However, I felt like something was amiss, but I couldn’t quite place it.

I pulled the lens away from my eye. My view didn’t change.

“Great,” she said, “now we can see the words we can’t read more close up.”

I brought the lens back to my eye then withdrew it again. After several more attempts, I finally figured out what I was seeing.

Without the lens, the words on the spine of the tome on the shelf behind Joen was written in Dwarvish. When I brought the lens back to my eye, the words were written, very clearly, in Common.

"Well," I said, "I guess I found our lexicon." I took the big book from Joen and started to read. "It works on Elvish too."

"Well hurray," Joen quipped. She stood up and stretched. "Nature calls."

I waved her off and she went to find a bathroom. I had barely begun to start reading when she tapped me on the shoulder. Still reading, I said, "That was fast."

She leaned down so her lips were very close to my ear and whispered, "Someone's here."

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye and she whispered, "He's writing, but not reading."

Right away, I realized someone was listening to us and writing down everything we said. We were doing research for him too, whoever he was.

The study table had a collection of quills, a communal inkwell, and a small stack of parchment sheets. I took one and wrote: What does he look like?

Joen took the quill from me and wrote: Cloke, hud up. Her penmanship was as bad as her spelling.

I took the quill back. Like last night?

I looked at her and she nodded.

Act normal, I wrote with my left hand and loosened the cutlass from its sheath with my right. But no reading aloud.

She nodded and went a different way to find a bathroom while I tried to read and keep one eye on the lookout. It wasn't easy.

After a bit, she came back and whispered in my ear, "He's gone."

"We should still be quiet," I whispered back, looking around.

She sat across from me, took a quill, and wrote: Wut exakly r we lucking four heer?

“Nice spelling,” I whispered and she made a gesture that the sailors used to use.

I took the quill from her hand and wrote: If I can find a book called *How to Destroy the Stone of Tymora*, that would be great, but failing that, anything that will at least point us in the direction of the Stone of Beshaba. We know we need both to destroy one.

She read that and nodded. We both went back to reading.

To save time, we’d pulled down all the documents from the section the librarian had pointed out—there weren’t many, maybe half a dozen tomes and two scroll cases, plus the index. A cursory glance at the tomes suggested there would be little information there. Two of the six were regional histories written by the famed traveler Volo. One concerned the history of the High Moor, and was in fact an Elvish translation of a tome my mentor, Perrault, had carried, and had once made me read—or more likely, this was the original tome, and Perrault’s was the translation. Another work of Volo detailed the Great Desert, Anauroch. What these had to do with the stones, I couldn’t quite fathom. I wondered at first if they’d perhaps been mixed into the collection by accident, but their titles appeared on the index alongside the remaining documents.

The other four tomes detailed histories and mythologies relating to Tymora and Beshaba. Whether they contained any relevant information, we couldn’t tell just at a glance. One tome did reference the stones themselves, but the passage in question was a story about the heroic deeds of a past stone bearer and said nothing about how to destroy them, or how to find them, or the identity of the Sentinels, or anything I found particularly useful or interesting.

While Joen made her way slowly through a book of funerary rites, I opened one of the scroll cases, which had huge scorch marks on it as though it had once been set on fire. It wasn’t easy to open, and was even harder to get the partially burned scroll out of, but eventually I sat back to

read it. Because it was written in some type of Elvish script, I traced the magical lens over the parchment, watching in amazement as the Common-tongue translation appeared behind the curved glass.

“Oi, this’s some sort of map,” Joen said.

I shushed her and looked up to see her holding a piece of parchment that had been tucked into the pages of the funeral book. She placed the map in the middle of the table so we could both see it. It showed some desert—probably Anauroch—but its labels were not in Common.

She reached over and snatched the lens from my hand.

“Hey!” I exclaimed, and my own voice sounded deafening in my ears.

Joen took great pleasure in shushing me. She gazed through the lens at the map.

“The lens isn’t working right,” she whispered. “This isn’t in Common.”

I slid closer to look, and sure enough, as she held the lens over the tags, the words still appeared to be in another language.

“We should ask the librarian about it,” she whispered.

I held up a hand to stop her and pointed to a symbol on the map that looked like half a letter.

“Oi, yeah, I see it. Could be an o? Maybe a *g*?”

I shrugged and reached out for the lens.

“I don’t see how it’s gonna matter who holds the lens,” she whispered, but gave it to me anyway.

I turned away from her, putting the lens back on my own parchment.

“Hey, give that back!” she shouted angrily, then clapped her hands over her mouth. Trying not to laugh, she grabbed at my shoulder, hoping to turn me back around. When that failed, she tried reaching over me to grab the lens. I just kept reading and trying not to laugh myself.

“Hey now, this one is interesting,” I whispered, then motioned her over to look through the lens with me. The

scroll was all about the Stone of Beshaba, how it was created, the first soul given to it, the Sentinel—I almost dropped the lens, I was so surprised.

Joen gasped and we both read: And the Sentinel was an Elf of exceeding Grace. And the Sentinel was called ...

But it was burned on that edge. We couldn't read it.

Joen pointed to a partial letter and whispered in my ear, "Could be an *a*."

I could only shrug and read on.

It said the Sentinels are connected to their stones and to each other. They always know where the other is and where the stone is, and the soul the stone has chosen. That must be how those cultists had found us.

"Great," Joen whispered.

Though it had been a while since we'd seen the hooded man or anyone else, I took up the quill and wrote: If this scroll case has information on the Stone of Beshaba, maybe the other has information on the Stone of Tymora.

She took the quill and wrote back: And that'd have the name of Timora's Centenal.

And that Sentinel can find the other Sentinel, I answered in writing. And then we'll have both Sentinels, and one can lead us to the other stone!

We looked at each other, then, lunged for the unopened scroll case as one. Joen got there first.

"Careful," I whispered.

"I know! Relax, eh?" she answered, plucking the silver stone cap from the scroll. With shaking hands she withdrew the parchment from inside. She stared at it a moment, then her face dropped into a half frown, half scowl.

I tried to make it clear from my facial expression that I was waiting to hear what it had to say. She turned it around to show me and mouthed, "The scroll is missing. There's just another map."

"No," I whispered, holding up the first map. "It's the same. Look." When we looked at them side by side it was obvious



that they were identical, but the lettering was different.

I thought for a bit then took the parchment from Joen's hand. I stacked the two maps, holding them toward a lamp. The parchments were thin, nearly translucent in the light, and I could clearly see the markings of one map through the other. I aligned them, and sure enough, the gaps in the text of one perfectly fit with the other.

"The lens," I whispered, turning to Joen. But of course, she was a step ahead of me. As I turned, I nearly smashed my face into her rising arm.

"Watch it, eh?" she muttered as she shoved me aside and grabbed the stacked maps, bringing the lens up in front of them.

It was Anauroch after all.

"But what's this?" Joen whispered, gesturing at the other word.

There were only two labels on the whole map—the other markings appeared to be short poems scattered around the edges. But Anauroch, the Great Desert, was clearly marked, and along its western edge was a small symbol the lens translated as "Twinspire."

I shook my head and shrugged. Neither of us wanted to say the word aloud lest our "friend," was still skulking about.

She looked at me, her dour mood of the past few hours gone, the twinkle back in her eye. "Hold these," she said, practically shoving the maps and the lens into my hand. I tried very hard not to crumple the parchment scrolls as I caught them, but I was fairly sure there was now a crease or two that hadn't been there before.

I watched in amazement as Joen became a veritable whirlwind of energy. She bounded over to the books, collecting them into one armload, and very nearly ran up the ladder. She piled the books into their compartment haphazardly then leaped back down to the floor. She swept the last parchment up, rolled it quickly and placed it in a scroll case. She put it in the correct case, I noted, but I

figured that was more luck than intent. I separated out the maps, moving to hand her the correct fragment. But she ignored me, climbing the ladder again, and placing the scroll case and the index scroll among the tomes.

Down the ladder she came again, grabbing the remaining empty scroll case. She held it out to me expectantly. When I hesitated, she tried to grab the maps. Realizing what she meant to do, I rolled up the parchment sheets, figuring I'd be a lot gentler than she was being. I slipped the maps into the case.

"Wrong case," I said.

"Oi, I don't care," Joen said, popping the cap on the case. "Come on!"

She took off at a near sprint, rounding the corners in the maze of books with such speed I feared she'd careen into the shelves and cause a serious disaster. But she'd always been graceful, and the year of training at the Tower of Twilight had only enhanced that, and despite her speed she moved in perfect balance. I followed. The boots I'd procured from Sali Dalib so more than a year ago in Memnon magically allowed me to move so quickly it was easy to match her speed.

On the journey through the library, Joen kept her head down, and I figured she wasn't paying much attention to our route. But, as it turns out, I was wrong. She never hesitated at a turn, but moved with purpose and direction, and only a few moments later we were bursting through a door into the antechamber of the library.

The librarian wasn't surprised in the least as we came through the door. She didn't even lift her head as she asked, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"There's a scroll missing from your collection," Joen said.

That got the librarian's attention. "Missing?"

"Missing. Not present. It ain't where it's supposed to be, you know?"

The librarian looked shocked. "All the documents in this library are magically marked," she said. "They can't be removed, or I'd know about it!"

But Joen had already pulled me past her. It was then that I realized Joen wasn't carrying the scroll case anymore.

"Oi," Joen said as we rushed to the door, "if you say so!"

"But ...," the librarian sputtered, "you wait now."

Joen, still running, let go of me to push the doors open with both hands, and we were out in the bright spring sunshine. Sunshine? I thought. How long had we been in there?

I followed her down the steps at a run while a loud clamor of gongs and bells sounded behind us.

"Do you still have that scroll case?" I asked Joen as we ran out into the street.

Joen shot me a mischievous glance and tore off into a shadowy alley.



"I can't believe you just did that," I said as we crouched in a narrow alley next to a pile of old wash buckets. We had spent most of the day crisscrossing the city, barely ahead of one group of city watchmen after another.

"That's not all," Joen replied, pulling a small object from her pocket. She flipped the magical lens into the air, caught it, and pocketed it again.

"You are a pirate after all," I said. "They're going to track us down for that, if not for the map."

"We'll be long gone before she even bothers to check on it," Joen answered.

"Will we?"

"Anauroch isn't that far from here, you know? A month, at the worst."

"To Twinspire?" I asked. "That's where the gods chose the Sentinels, right? Maybe we can find their names there."

“Oi, to Twinspire!” Joen said happily.

“Not so fast,” said a man standing in the shadows nearby.  
“Twinspire is long buried, and the world is better off because of it.”

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

Chrysaor emerged from the shadows, his blue skin shining in the sun, his hair a bit longer than I remembered.

"You've been following us all this time?" Joen asked.

Chrysaor shrugged. "I didn't have to follow you. I simply waited for you to take the next logical step on your journey and to come here."

"You wasted a year just waiting?" I asked.

"A year spent in Silverymoon is hardly wasted," Chrysaor countered. "Trust me, my boy, I have my own ways of keeping busy."

"Well, you should spend another here, then," Joen said. "You ain't coming with us."

"You shouldn't be going at all, young lady," he replied. "It's far too dangerous, especially for you."

"I can handle myself."

"I've no doubt you can fight. But it's still unwise."

"And for me? Is it too dangerous for me?" I asked.

Chrysaor laughed. "You forget my purpose, boy. If you go to Twinspire, perhaps you further your quest to destroy the stone, or perhaps you fall and the artifact is lost for a time. Either way, I gain."

"If killing me would benefit you, why haven't you tried it yet?"

Chrysaor shrugged and threw me a crooked smile.

"I'm with Joen on this one," I said. "You stay here, we leave, we never see you again."

"If you so wish," he said. "But you'll never find Twinspire without me."

"Oi, that tune's getting old."

I patted the map on my hip. "We'll find it."

"How old is that map?" he asked. "And how detailed? The world is not static, you know. Things changed over the eons. Twinspire is long since gone. And besides, you know there are beings with a vested interest in the stones not being destroyed."

"You mean the Sentinels," I answered.

Chrysaor nodded. "Powerful beings, those Sentinels. Ages old. And you want to kill them."

"No," I said. "I just want to be rid of the stone."

"Which will kill them, which they do not want. So you think they'd let you get any closer to your goal? Even now, they surely have eyes upon you."

Of course I knew he was right, that cultists of Beshaba at least had already confronted us, were spying on us.

"Oi, don't listen to him," Joen said, turning to me. "And don't trust him."

"I don't," I replied. "And I don't believe him, that we can't find it. But I also don't see the harm in taking him."

"He just said he wants you dead, didn't he?"

"But he's had plenty of opportunities and never tried to kill me," I answered.

"The boy speaks wisely," Chrysaor cut in.

"Quiet," Joen and I both answered at the same time.

"Oi, it's your quest, it's your decision," Joen said.

I pondered a moment, then said to Chrysaor, "As before, you walk ahead, you don't share our camp, and you don't share our food."

"Of course," the blue pirate said with a bow.

"Then let's fetch our horse and be off."

“To Twinspire,” Chrysaor said, and I thought I caught a hint of excitement in his voice.

“To Twinspire,” Joen echoed, her tone remarkably similar to that of her most hated enemy.



“I wonder whose campsite this is,” Joen said, stirring some ash with one of her daggers.

Chrysaor started to say, “It probably belongs to—”

“Oi, I wasn’t talkin’ to you, eh?” Joen interrupted.

The pirate smiled. “Of course not,” he said. He bowed low, turned, and walked out of the campsite. But he took only a few steps—just a token gesture—before he stopped and turned to face us again. He still wore that smug, knowing grin. I rolled my eyes. The genasi fully expected we’d be asking his opinion, and soon.

This abandoned campsite was the first sign of life we’d seen since we entered the desert two days ago. And it was hardly a sign: blowing sand had covered most of it. Any bedroll that had been here was long since gone. The only evidence that anyone had ever been there was the simple fire pit lined with small stones and filled with ash.

“Oi, Maimun. I asked you a question, eh?”

“I have no idea,” I replied.

“The ash is still warm,” she said, touching the surface with her hand. “I’d say that’s a good sign, you know.”

“Or it’s just the sun,” I said.

Our journey had taken us only nine days, and another three after we’d reached the desert, but in those twelve days it seemed the season had shifted. It was still spring, technically, but summer was a mere month away. And here in the desert, the warm season seemed to start sooner.

I walked a quick perimeter. The campsite lay in a low trough between two towering dunes of sand, so I wanted to get a good view of the surrounding land from the crest of

those dunes. There were wicked things in wild areas like Anauroch, and we'd be easy ambush targets here should anything be hunting.

"You shouldn't worry," Chrysaor said, seeing me walking my path. "Desert hunters rest in the day and hunt at night. You've another seven hours or so before you need to worry."

"We, you mean," I said.

"But I'm not part of this little troupe, am I?"

"No, but I doubt a desert hunter will know that—or care either."

Chrysaor laughed. "How many times must I escape from you before you realize I'm in no danger?" he said.

"As I recall," I answered, "I escaped from you first."

Chrysaor's smile did not diminish. "You did at that. Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't a particular spellcaster come to your rescue, though? And tell me, where is your wizard friend now, and how will he rescue you out here?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I replied, "but didn't you escape by jumping in the water and swimming away? I mean, you are a creature of elemental water, aren't you? So tell me, where is your ocean now, and how will it help you escape out here?"

"Oi," Joen called from the fire pit. "I think I found something!"

Chrysaor and I dropped our little argument and trotted over to join her. "What is it?" the genasi asked.

Joen scowled at him and didn't answer.

I rolled my eyes, exaggerating the motion, making sure she'd see it clearly. "What is it?" I asked.

She held up her hand—and in it lay a piece of crumpled, charred parchment. "It looks like the same parchment as the ones in the library," she said. "Maybe the missing scroll?"

"Well now," the genasi said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, "wouldn't that be a marvelous coincidence, happening upon something like that way out here, just by virtue of luck?"



Ignoring the genasi, I took the parchment from Joen and fumbled open my pack, withdrawing the map we'd taken from Silverymoon. I held up the two pieces together.

"Doesn't look the same," I said.

"Well, one's all burned, the other ain't," Joen replied.

Chrysaor coughed loudly and cleared his throat. We ignored him and continued to examine the maps, but he continued to clear his throat and fidget.

"What?" Joen and I both said at the same time.

Chrysaor said nothing, just pointed to the ground at his feet. He made a brushing motion, then dropped his foot to the ground. Unexpectedly, it landed with a loud *clomp*.

"So you found a rock," Joen said, her voice tinged with anger. She didn't budge as I moved to investigate.

"It's not a rock," I said, reaching Chrysaor.

The stone beneath his feet was solid. I dropped to my knees and began to clear sand, soon finding the edges, about three feet apart in any direction. The stone was a rough square.

"It's a paving stone," Chrysaor said, "set by some ancient hand."

"Oi, if it's a road, where're the other stones?" Joen asked.

I scraped my hand out a foot or so from the side of this first stone and hit something solid. "Right here," I said.

I stood, clomping my boots against the ground as I walked. They were softer than Chrysaor's, so the sound was far less satisfying, but I could definitely feel the solid surface beneath my feet.

"Looks like it heads this way," I said, walking along the trough between the sand dunes. With each step, I stomped my foot down, and each time I felt it connect with stone.

The wind picked up, swirling the sand around. The sand obscured my vision, but somehow, with everything slightly hazy, the stones became clearer, the path more obvious. I broke into a light jog, following the path as it cut a wide turn around a great mound of sand.

Then, in the distance, I saw something strange—it was part of the landscape, but not natural. It was some sort of rock formation, I supposed, a column reaching up from the desert. Though it was largely obscured by the blowing sand, it looked even more out of focus, like it wouldn't be seen clearly even on the clearest day.

I quickened my pace, covering the last hundred yards at a dead sprint. At that speed, I couldn't feel the paving stones beneath my feet, but somehow I knew my path followed the ancient road. Joen and Chrysaor couldn't keep up, and I could hear Joen calling out from behind me, though I couldn't make out the words.

When at last I reached the object, I understood why I couldn't clearly make out its shape. It was not, as I had thought, a pillar of stone. It was two pillars, side by side. From the angle I approached them from, they were lined up one after the other so they seemed to shift relative to each other. That, combined with the wind-driven sand ...

"What happened to the sand?" I asked no one in particular.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the sandstorm vanished. Once again, the afternoon sun beat down on my head and shoulders, hot and oppressive. I tried to recall where in my run the wind had died. I was sure it had happened before I'd reached the pillars, but I couldn't quite remember. I hadn't been paying attention to anything except my goal during that sprint.

"Oi, you're standing on it," Joen said, finally catching up to me. She was a bit out of breath. Chrysaor soon followed, jogging lightly.

"You know what I meant," I said. I walked around the first pillar, studying it closely. It was a simple column, perhaps eight feet tall and two feet across, carved, obviously ancient, but not eroded in the least. Runes and sigils traced over the perfectly smooth white surface, some carved, some written

in a deep red ink that also had not faded despite the apparent age of the structure.

“Ah,” Chrysaor said from behind me, “here we are, drawn as if by the power of the Goddess of Luck herself—oh, ah, yes ...” He ended with a smug chuckle and I could feel Joen staring daggers at him.

I looked at the second pillar. It appeared nearly identical to the first, though the runes were different. And unlike the first, the second column had a rope tied around it. The rope stretched away from the pillar at a steep angle, diving into the sand below, completely taut, as if it were attached to the ground—or attached to something buried beneath the ground.

“Oi, what are you doing?” Joen said, staring at me curiously.

I pointed to the rope. “I wonder where that goes,” I said.

Joen’s eyes widened in surprise. She ran over to the rope and reached out with trembling hands, not daring to touch it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, joining her at the second pillar.

“Have you seen anything like this?” she asked, breathless.

“What, like a rope? Yes, I have, on more than one occasion.”

She gave me a sour look. “You know what I meant,” she said.

“I really don’t,” I replied, but she ignored me.

She swept her hand in an arc, about even with the noose of the rope, where it was tied around the pillar. She struck the pillar and she withdrew her hand, nearly falling over backward.

“It’s tied to something!” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s tied to that big pillar.”

“What pillar?” she asked.

“You can see it?” Chrysaor asked me. “Interesting, though not unexpected.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why wouldn’t I be able to see it?”

“She what?” asked Joen.

“Obviously not for the reason she can’t see it,” he said.

“Please, be more vague.”

“There are usually only four beings on this plane of existence who can see the pillars at the gate to Twinpire,” he said.

“Usually?”

“Well, certain creatures who aren’t from this plane could see it, I’m sure—demons, devils, archons, beings of that nature—but only four who are native.”

“Oi, the bearers and the Sentinels, eh?” Joen asked.

Chrysaor nodded.

“So what do the carvings say?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Chrysaor answered. “I can’t see it.” His answer seemed disingenuous. I figured he was lying.

Joen pulled a small object from one of her many pockets. “I’m still not sure what you two are talking about, but I suppose you’ll just have to read it yourself, then,” she said. She held up the small glass lens she’d taken from the library at Silverymoon.

“Resourceful,” Chrysaor said as Joen handed me the lens.

“Thank you,” Joen said, beaming. Then she apparently realized who gave her the compliment, and her face dropped into a scowl.

I held the lens up to my eye, peering at the carving. “ ‘Tymora, guide my way, guide my feet, that I may find fortune even when I stumble,’ ” I read aloud. “It’s a prayer to Tymora, all of it.”

“All of it?” Chrysaor said. “All to Tymora, none to Beshaba? This place is sacred for both of them.”

“Oh, right,” I said, turning around. “There’s another pillar.”

“Nice of you to share that information,” Chrysaor said with a grimace.

“Oi, get off your high horse,” Joen said. “You knew about this place, eh? And you didn’t show it to us, did you?”

“I offered, and you told me to be quiet,” the genasi reminded her.

Joen scoffed, waving her hand dismissively at him.

“It’s a prayer to Beshaba, all right,” I cut in. “Really harsh too. ‘May the road of my enemies be forever full of pitfalls, and spikes, and fire, and pain, and blood, and—’ ”

“Oi, that’s enough,” Joen said. “We get the picture, you know.”

“There’s more,” I said.

“We don’t want to hear it,” she answered.

“No, I mean there’s something else entirely. The prayers are carved in, but there’s some kind of writing in ink as well. But the lens isn’t translating it.”

“What does it read?” Chrysaor said. “It could be magical text, unable to be magically translated. But I am quite versed in the various languages of the land.”

Something about the pirate made me nervous just then—more than normally around that unpredictable genasi. He always seemed so detached, as though he didn’t really ever take anything seriously, but now he seemed a bit too keen to know what was written on a pillar consecrated in the name of an evil goddess.

“It reads, ‘*Sirlar, geri sekilekegini golgeler,*’ ” I said, slowly and carefully enunciating each syllable, though I had a nagging feeling I shouldn’t have.

As soon as I finished, the ground began to violently shake. I fell, and Joen only managed to hold her balance by grabbing the rope. Chrysaor seemed somehow unaffected, swaying as a tree in a windstorm, but in complete control of his body and his balance. I was not surprised.

But I was a bit startled when the ground fell away beneath us.

## ***CHAPTER FOURTEEN***

A single shaft of light penetrated the darkness—diffuse, lost in the swirl of sand, dust, and pulverized stone. The shaft angled in—it was midafternoon above—and cast a dully glowing circle of light on a great wall of stone. Crystals lined the wall, sparkling in the light and reflecting it out into the massive cavern beyond.

It took my eyes many heartbeats to adjust to the dim light, and it took the dust at least as long to settle. I stood on a rough stone floor lightly coated in the dust of ages. As I gained my bearings, it became clear I was in some sort of natural cavern. Three sides made a semicircle more than a hundred feet across, and on the fourth side the floor sloped down into impenetrable blackness.

“We should ...,” I started to say. But I realized that I stood alone.

That I stood at all was itself a minor miracle. The hole above, where the ground had fallen out beneath us, was at least fifty feet up. I ran my thumb across the one ring I wore, an enchanted ring I’d been given by my mentor long ago, one of three magical treasures I’d inherited from him. Its magic had slowed my descent and saved my life.

But Joen had no such ring.

“Joen!” I called out in the peculiar voice of terror that comes when sudden relief becomes even more sudden

dread.

The only response I heard was my own voice echoing back at me, at once muffled by the sand and somehow amplified by the cavern.

I scrambled around, low to the ground, looking for any sign that she'd fallen in with me. But the cavern was too uneven, the light too dim, and I could make out only the many juts and gullies of the water-carved floor—and one unnatural object.

It was a rope, one end coiled neatly around a stone, the other reaching heavenward.

"She grabbed the rope," I whispered to myself. "Right before we fell, she grabbed the rope." I looked up to the ceiling, to the hole. Sure enough, there was a form there, humanoid, descending slowly. "Joen!" I called again.

"Not quite," Chrysaor answered, coming into view. He beat his wings—his *wings*?—a few times, circling as he dropped, landing gracefully right beside me. "You are surprising," he said. "I thought my journey ended, yet you live."

"Where's Joen?" I demanded.

"No, that's not the question you want to ask," he said. "There is a much more obvious and more important one."

"What, about those ugly wings?" I was, of course lying. His arms had turned to beautifully feathered white wings, the wings of a great eagle, perhaps. But at that moment, nothing about him could have been beautiful to me. "I don't care. Where is she?"

Chrysaor laughed at me. "Of course not the wings," he said. "They're trivial, if convenient." He clapped his hands together—or, rather, his wing tips—and the magic faded, the feathered appendages again replaced by blue-skinned arms, sleeveless, with nondescript white leather cords around each wrist. His hands dropped to his hips, and he assumed a pose I was more familiar with in Joen: defiant, even petulant, ready to fight if he didn't get his way.

I dropped my own hand to the hilt of my sword. "What have you done?" I said.

"The question you should have asked—," he began.

"Where is she?" I said, interrupting him. I drew my sword slowly from its sheath.

"The question is," the pirate went on, "did I know what the spell was going to do? Did I lead you into this trap? Is it my fault you're down here?" He drew his own fine, thin blade from its sheath.

"Tell me where Joen is," I demanded, advancing a step.

"The answer, of course, is yes, I knew." He brought his blade up just as I lunged forward. Metal rang against metal, and the genasi skipped back a step, keeping distance between him and me. "Yes, of course it was a trap. And yes, of course it's all my fault."

I set myself in an aggressive posture. It was much like the fencer's stance I'd learned long ago from Perrault, but informed by my training at the Tower of Twilight. This time, I set my right foot—usually my trailing foot—a half step ahead of my left, rather than a half step behind. Still I kept it horizontal to my body while my left foot I kept vertical, facing directly at my enemy. I gripped my blade in both hands, hilt held near my left shoulder, blade extending across my body. If Chrysaor attacked me while I was in this stance, I would be well able to defend, but my mobility would be side-to-side, rather than a retreat. So I would be more able to exploit any holes he left in his own defenses.

But he didn't attack. He simply stood five or so feet from me, his own blade vertical in front of him, his posture relaxed. "I knew, you see, because I lied," he said.

"You like hearing the sound of your own voice, don't you?"

"Yes, I find it rather pleasant." He chuckled.

I planted all my weight on my forward foot, dropped my right hand from the hilt of my saber, and lunged at him. My right arm swung down behind me and my left foot leaped out ahead, knee bent, with my right leg locked behind me.



My sword darted forward, as fast as a lightning bolt, covering that five feet in the blink of an eye. The tip dived straight for Chrysaor's heart.

His sword flashed across, but he was late on his parry, as I knew he'd be. For the first time, he seemed caught off guard, surprised by the suddenness and viciousness of my attack. He fell back, bending at the waist, back, back, until he was doubled over. My sword grazed along his chest, cutting a few straps on his tunic. His parry finally reached my blade, but with no strength behind it.

I finished my lunge, not trying to redirect my thrust at all. I simply let my graceful movement play itself out, coming to a rest at full extension, my sword pressed firmly against Chrysaor's chest. He, to his credit, held his balance despite the extraordinarily awkward angle he was bent at. That is, he held his balance until I pressed downward with some force.

Chrysaor, the blue pirate, who had always seemed so in control, fell unceremoniously to the dirt, landing flat on his back.

I stepped up, bringing the tip of my sword down to the hollow of his chest. I stepped on his hand for good measure, and he released his sword, useless at that angle anyway.

"Where," I repeated, "is Joen?"

"You don't want—," he began.

I kicked him in the ribs. Hard. He winced in pain.

"Where?" I asked again.

"She's still up above," he said.

"Alive?"

"Unharméd. But trust me—"

I kicked him again. "Never again," I said.

"You don't want her to come down here," he finished anyway.

"She was right about you all along." I retracted my sword, sheathed it, and collected Chrysaor's fallen blade. It was not curved like my saber, but was of much finer make, light and

balanced. It was far from ideal, surely, but it would do. I lamented briefly the loss of my old sword, the sword Perrault had left me, the magical saber that could burst into flame on command.

"Curious," Chrysaor said.

"What is?"

"That." He pointed into the darkness, to where a small point of light shone, a bluish glow. "It seems your way is marked. That, I did not expect."

"My way may be marked," I confirmed, "but as I said, I will never trust you again."

I moved to take the rope, planning to climb to the surface and check on Joen. I slipped Chrysaor's sword through a loop on my belt, took the rope in both hands, and started to climb.

I'd only gone a few yards, though, when something about the feel of the rope changed. It was suddenly less balanced, less than a perfect line to the surface, to where it was tied off. It swayed a bit, not dangerously, but completely out of my control.

I peered upward through the still-sandy air to the surface. I thought I could make out something moving up there. It was a person climbing down the rope with some speed. Her hair shone golden in the slanting rays of the sun.

"Joen!" I called.

"Oi!" she called back as I started shimmying back down the rope.

"What took you so long?" I asked.

"That blue son of a wharf rat did something to me, eh?" she called. "Tied me up or something."

I hopped down the last few feet to the stone floor and glared at Chrysaor, who had risen to his feet. "She was bound, magically but gently," he said in response to my angry look. "And for her own good."

"Her own good is not for you to decide," I said.

"Nor you," he countered.

Joen slid down to join us. "Well, let's ask me then, eh?" she said. As soon as her feet hit solid ground, her daggers left their sheaths.

"Don't kill him," I said.

"Oi, why not?"

I struggled for a good answer. A moment ago, I could have killed him myself, but that was because I thought he'd hurt Joen. She took my hesitation as an invitation, advancing on the genasi.

"Because," I said at last, "he didn't kill us."

"He tied me up," she reminded.

"He could have killed you."

"Maybe next time he will, eh?" she asked.

"No," Chrysaor said, "there won't be a next time."

"Because you'll be dead already," Joen said, advancing another step.

"Because my task is complete."

"Could you be more vague?" I asked. "If you're working for Elbeth, maybe I could understand why you would bring us to Malchor Harpell, and why you would bring us here. But why would you send me down here and tie Joen up on the surface? Why separate us? Why not just tell us what you really want with me, with the stone, with this place ... with whatever it is you really want?"

He laughed. "All that would take some effort. Now, my sword, if you please?"

"I do not please," I answered. "Consider it the price of your life."

"Very well," he said. He bowed low, first to me, then to Joen, who looked as if she were about to charge the last few feet and stab him midbow. Then he clapped his hands together three times in rapid succession. With a dazzling white flash, his arms turned into wings.

"You should have stayed above," he said to Joen. "I'm very sorry, my dear, for what is to come."

He leaped skyward, beating his wings a few times, pulling himself up and out of the tunnel.

Joen looked after him with a mix of anger and disappointment. "Well, that was interesting, eh?" she said.

"Something like that."

"Where do we go from—?"

The rope started coiling up at our feet, and we both stepped back, staring as it gathered in a mess on the stone floor.

"Oh," Joen said, "no, he didn't."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I thought I heard Chrysaor's laugh echoing down from above, but maybe I just imagined it.

"Yeah," Joen said, "he sure did."

"I don't ..." I hesitated, feeling stupid. "I don't kill people."

Joen looked at me and didn't have to say, "Yeah, all right, but maybe just that once." Her eyes said it all.

"Our path is marked," I said, changing the subject and turning toward the darkness.

In the distance, the blue light flickered then went out completely.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

“Do you know what an umber hulk is?” I asked, trying to break through Joen’s stony silence.

She carried a torch we’d found in the magical pack Malchor had given us. I wasn’t sure whether the magical pack had conjured it in the manner it created food when we needed it, or if the wise and forward-thinking wizard had simply stashed a torch in there for us, just in case.

“It’s a creature that lives in the deep, dark places of Faerûn,” I went on. “It stands eight or nine feet high, and it’s wider than you are tall. And its whole body is covered by thick plates of chitinous armor, like an ant’s shell but much thicker. And it has—”

“Oi, is there one about to bite your head off right this exact moment?” Joen interrupted.

“Yeah, no. Sorry. It’s just, this place made me think of them. ‘Umbur’ means ‘shadow,’ you know, and there are a lot of shadows down here.”

“Please just stop talking.”

“Sorry.” I wasn’t wrong about the shadows, though. The torchlight seemed puny in the massive cavern, a tiny pinprick of light in a vast, empty, black nothing. But it was enough to illuminate the numerous stalagmites stretching up from the ground that cast long, deep shadows stretching to the distant walls. We could faintly see the walls, and as in

the place we'd initially fallen into, they were flecked with some reflective crystals that caught what meager trace of our light reached them and threw it back at us, a faint twinkle in the distance.

A rustle, a hint of motion just beyond our light, made Joen jump.

"Don't worry," I said quietly. "It's not an umber hulk. They're very adept at stealth. You'd never hear it—"

"Shut up about umber hulks!" she said in a harsh whisper. She shifted her torch to her left hand and drew a dagger with her right. The rustle came again, and Joen, apparently honing in on its location, let fly.

Her dagger darted through the air, torchlight seeming to shimmer as it reflected off the perfect blade. It struck the ground just beyond the circle of our torchlight, throwing a brilliant spark. It ricocheted like a stone skipping off a pond, bouncing with a *clang, clang ... splash*.

Joen's eyes went wide at the sound of her treasured weapon hitting water. She rushed forward, sputtering, having apparently forgotten that some potential danger lurked directly in her path. And she brought the torch with her, leaving me standing, shocked, in near-total darkness.

I recovered my senses and ran after her, catching her about twenty paces ahead, at the edge of a still pool of black water. Joen's arms were elbow deep in it as she sifted around. Tears around her eyes and on her cheeks glistened in the flickering torchlight.

"Oi," she said. "Oi, I didn't mean to ... I didn't ... oi, please ..." She withdrew one of her arms to wipe away her tears, but her arm was just as wet.

I dropped to my knees beside her. "It's all right," I said. "We'll find it."

I rolled up my sleeves, intending to help her search, though the water looked really deep and I didn't expect to find anything.

But something caught my eye: a glint, a reflection, under the otherwise-unmarred surface of the pool. Tentatively, I reached in for it. The water was lukewarm and not unpleasant. As my hand approached the shining object, that object seemed to approach my hand as well. When my fist closed around a small, scaly something, I pulled my arm out, and with it a small creature. It was an ugly thing with a pale brow, chitinous body, four spindly legs, two long antennae, and a spiked tail it started twirling like a maple seed.

And in its mouth it held a sparkling dagger.

"Uh, Joen," I whispered. When she didn't respond, I gently nudged her. She turned to look and saw the fish and the dagger.

She gasped in horror. "What is that ... thing?" she asked.

"It looks like a baby rust monster," I said, remembering Master Sage Hix Loiren's *Corrosive Animals of the Heartlands* from Malchor's library.

"A ... rust ...," she stammered.

"Yeah, a rust monster. They live in caves and eat metal: ore, crafted, doesn't matter. They especially like magical metal."

She gasped again and snatched the dagger from the rust monster's mouth. In a single fluid motion, she grabbed the scaly little thing by the tail and flung it back into the water.

"Hey," I said, "it was helping you!"

"It was trying to *eat* my dagger!" she answered. She peered intently at her blade, running her finger along its edge, searching for any imperfections.

"At least it brought your dagger back to you."

"It's not damaged," she said, obviously relieved.

We both stood up and looked around. It took us a few moments to reorient ourselves, but we were soon on our way in the only direction we had left to go: deep into the cave. The pool of water emptied into a slow-running stream, which in turn emptied into a larger pool. A faint, nondescript echo soon grew into an almost deafening roar as we walked along

the edge of an increasingly fast-moving river, the black water turning white around jagged stalagmites studded with crystals whose razor-sharp edges glinted in our torchlight.

We walked along the river, moving with the flow, for only twenty yards or so before our route became clear. Two bridges, narrow constructions of stone, arched over the water near the wall of the cavern. Below them, the river raged more violently than ever, narrowing and descending as it disappeared beneath an overhanging ledge.

Joen moved to the nearest bridge.

"Wait," I said. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"What, another umber hulk gonna jump out and attack us?" she asked.

"Har har," I said. I pulled a coin from my pocket and flipped it onto the bridge. The coin bounced along once, twice, skipping off the stone. My throw had been perfect, and the coin slid perfectly along the bridge's arc.

But as soon as the coin touched the center of the bridge, the stone structure simply disappeared. One moment there was a solid if narrow arch, the next, the coin dropped into the raging torrent below, swept out of sight. Then, as quickly as it had vanished, the bridge reappeared.

We tried the same trick again on the second bridge, with the same result.

"So," Joen said, "we find another way across, yeah?"

"There is no other way," I said. "Why would someone build a matching pair of magical bridges if we could just go around them? But there may be something more to it." I looked around and soon confirmed my suspicions.

Seven white candles sat in a line on a small, flat stone beside the river, directly between the two bridges. I moved to take a closer look.

"I've seen this before," I said. "In the Lady's Hall in Baldur's Gate. It's part of a prayer to Tymora. See how the wicks are very long?" I motioned Joen closer, and she approached hesitantly. "We light the candle on Tymora's



end, and the wick will fall toward or away from the next." I took Joen's torch and moved to light the rightmost candle.

"How do you know which end it is, eh?" she asked. "I mean, what if you light Beshaba's candle instead? Won't that be bad luck?"

I shrugged and brought my hand to my chest, to the magical stone blessed by Tymora, to my curse. "Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen," I said.

Joen rolled her eyes at me. Even in the flickering, dim light I saw the motion clearly. But she didn't object as I brought the torch down to the candle.

But it wouldn't light.

"See?" she said.

I frowned and moved the torch to the leftmost candle. It wouldn't light either.

"Odd," I said.

"You think?" Joen crouched down beside me. "Oi, there's something written here." She pointed to the stone beside the candles, where, indeed, the otherwise-smooth surface revealed a beautifully flowing, carved script.

I pulled the magical lens from my pocket. "It says, 'Let Tymora's luck guide your path.' Great, that's useful. I mean, isn't that exactly what I've been trying to do? But the candles won't light."

Joen wasn't paying attention. As I rambled on, she took up the torch and set it to the center candle. After a few heartbeats, the wick fell to the left, lighting the next candle, and that one soon followed, and again. And as the fourth and final candle lit, the one all the way to the left, that bridge began to glow with a faint white light.

I looked at Joen with some amazement. "How did you know to do that?" I asked.

She shrugged and walked to the bridge.

"Wait a moment," I called. "You don't know it's safe."

"Learn to fly in the last few hours?" she asked me over her shoulder. She knew I hadn't, and we both knew we couldn't

get back out the way we came. She shrugged and kept walking, taking the torch with her. I followed so as not to be left in darkness.

"So how much farther do you think it is, anyway?" she asked when I joined her on the other side. "To whatever it is we're looking for here, that is?"

"I don't know. I saw a light down this way, but it was far off and I couldn't really judge the distance."

"What kind of light? Was it that bridge, then?"

"No," I said. "It was a blue flicker, like a magical torch."

As I finished my thought, a blue light sprung up in the darkness, not a hundred yards from us, and maybe thirty feet off the cave floor. I stared at it a moment and would have liked to look a bit longer. I thought, though I couldn't be sure until my eyes better adjusted, that it was, indeed, in the shape of a flaming blade.

But as soon as the light sprung up, Joen gasped, and off she went again at a swift walk, then a light jog, and soon a dead sprint. With the magical boots I'd stolen from Sali Dalib, I had no trouble keeping up with her. But I wasn't sure I wanted to be going that direction so fast, so unprepared.

The blue light blinked out again, not as if it had been put out, but rather hidden from view. Joen slowed as we neared the spot where it had been, and we approached cautiously.

Two massive obelisks rose out of the cavern floor. Each stretched heavenward, to the darkened ceiling, coming to a point far above us. The torchlight caught on their surfaces, each of white marble, perfectly smooth except for runes carved around the thick stones, starting at the bottom and winding their way upward. The surfaces shone brightly, without a speck of dust on them despite the untold centuries they'd spent here undisturbed. They caught Joen's torchlight and threw it back at us, seemingly brighter than before.

My eyes traced the runes, following their parallel paths toward the ceiling. It took me only moments to be sure that,

as I'd suspected, they were perfect mirror images of each other.

Joen's gaze, though, fell to the cavern floor between the spires.

"Oi," she said quietly. "Get on your guard, eh?" She gently set down her torch and drew her daggers.

I followed her gaze to the ground, to the object lying there, which she approached. Four feet across, perhaps, oddly shaped ...

"It's a body," Joen said, kneeling beside it. "A dwarf. Doesn't look too old either."

"Not too old? A young dwarf?"

"Not too long lying here, I meant," Joen explained. "Dwarf's old, though, gray beard ... and what's this?" She stood up, holding something that glittered in the light. As I sorted the object out, an empty feeling hit me in the stomach.

"Spectacles," I whispered. "Big nose?" I asked, moving slowly toward her.

"Big nose," she said, even as I finally saw the dead dwarf's face. "And he's holding something."

"His name is Alviss," I said, bending solemnly to regard him. I don't know why I did that, but I felt the need to look at him closely, to confirm his death, as if I were letting his spirit know that someone cared he was gone. I'd lost a lot of friends, I realized then, and many closer to me than Alviss had been, but I did care. I had to care, as I had to hope that someone might care if it were me lying there. It seemed obvious, and somehow I knew it anyway, that Alviss had died alone, in this dark and empty place. No one should die like that.

"He's a friend," I said.

Joen gently pried open his fingers to get at the object he held.

"Any wounds on him?" I asked.

"Don't see any," Joen said. "Look at this, though." She grasped some object and pulled it from his hand.

The still air was suddenly filled with wind, a powerful, swirling gale. Dust flew everywhere, obscuring everything. The two pillars glowed ever more brightly until they were unbearable to look at. I saw Joen stagger and fall, but I couldn't move to help her. A low hum resonated throughout the area, echoing off the distant cavern walls. Then, as suddenly as it started, the wind died away.

And all the light from the obelisks and from our torch died with it.

I drew my sword and looked around, listening for any potential danger.

"Joen," I whispered harshly, but got no response.

I tried to remember exactly where Joen had fallen, but the storm had been so disorienting. I moved slowly, feeling my way across the ground until I bumped into an object lying motionless. But it was Alviss, not Joen.

"Joen," I said again, more loudly.

I heard a shuffling noise to my side, much like the one we'd heard earlier when Joen had nearly lost her dagger. We'd never actually found out what had made that noise, I remembered. I could only hope that this noise was different, that this noise was my fallen companion.

I moved toward it, leading with my sword, flat side down so as not to accidentally cut Joen.

Something brushed past my shoulder and I spun, sword sweeping across.

Someone caught the blade and held it fast.

"Calm now," she said, but it wasn't Joen's voice, it was Jaide's.

"You've been following me, following us," I said.

"No," she replied. "I got here first."

"You knew where this place was? How to find it?"

"I do."

"How?"

“That should be obvious by now, child,” she said somberly.

Only the darkness prevented Jaide from seeing the shocked expression on my face—eyes wide, jaw slack. “You’re a Sentinel,” I said. “Tymora’s Sentinel.”

“Take this,” she said, forcing something into my open hand—the hilt of a sword. The hilt of my sword, my old magical blade that I’d thought lost. “How ...?” I started to ask, at the same time bringing the sword’s magical blue flame out. But as the area was bathed in a soft blue glow, my question caught in my throat.

On the ground, beside poor, dead Alviss, Joen lay motionless.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

“Joen!” I grasped her shoulders and shook her, but she didn’t stir.

“She’s ... is she ...?” I stammered.

Jaide put a hand on my shoulder and grasped Joen’s hand with the other. She closed her eyes, concentrating for a moment. “No,” the elf said. “She isn’t dead, just unconscious.”

I breathed a long sigh of relief, then wrapped Joen in a great hug.

Suddenly the air around me felt different, denser somehow, and I became acutely aware of Jaide’s hand. It had grown impossibly hot. The light from my sword flickered then died. The air seemed almost solid, and I found breathing impossible. Then I was bathed in bright light and breathed freely. It took my eyes a few moments to adjust. Jaide took her hand from my shoulder. The wind rustled my hair.

The wind.

I was outside, kneeling in the sand beneath a beautiful desert night sky, a few hundred yards from the cavernous hole that formed the entrance to the ruins of Twinpire.

And the girl wrapped in my arms was awake.

“Oi!” Joen said. “It’s just me, eh? Relax!”

“I thought you were dead,” I said, breathless.

She looked around. "I ain't dead? Well, that's a relief, eh?"

"What you picked up," I said, "is it the size of a fist? Perfectly round and black, heavier than it looks?"

She nodded. "Black pearl, right? Yeah. Why, what is it?"

"The Stone of Beshaba, I think," I said.

"Oi, I should probably put it back, then."

"I don't think you can," I said, but hesitated to say the rest. "I think it's bound to you now."

Joen's face fell as she ran through a stream of confused emotions. She started breathing in gasps.

"But we needed both to destroy both," I reminded her.

"Oi, but this is not good, eh?" she said, managing to catch her breath. "Now where do we go, and how fast can we get there?"

"We'll ask Jaide," I said, turning to the elf.

"We'll ask—" Joen sputtered.

Jaide stood a few yards away, patting Haze gently on the neck, offering the mare a drink from one of the waterskins tied to her saddle. The mare was obviously happy to see the priestess.

"Oi, what are you doing here?" Joen said, rising to a sitting position. "Come to get your horse back?"

"First," Jaide said, "we have to be out of this desert."

I took Joen's arm, helping her to her feet. She rose unsteadily, but once she was standing she found her balance

Perhaps it was the light—though the moon was full and the stars shone brightly, it was still dim—or perhaps the dust, but Haze's coat of striking white hair seemed somehow more lustrous than normal. Jaide, though, seemed somehow diminished from the last time I'd seen her. Her porcelain skin looked dull, wrinkles framed her eyes, and even a streak of gray laced her black hair. As usual, she wore her hair pulled over one ear, but the point of the other had a notch in it.

She saw me looking, and brought her hand up to her ear. "Shark bite," she said, "while I was recovering that fine

sword of yours.”

“Oi, do tell us how you managed that,” Joen said. Anger tinged her voice, as it always seemed to when Jaide was around.

“Magic, mostly,” Jaide answered. “Besides being one of the Sentinels, I am also a priestess of some power.”

While I blinked and shook my head at that matter-of-fact admission, Joen seemed entirely unfazed.

“But how’d you know he lost it, eh?” she asked.

I piped in, “Sentinels watch their bearers, don’t they?”

“Indeed,” Jaide answered.

“So you were watching me when I fought Asbeel on the island.”

“When we fought him,” Joen said.

Jaide nodded.

“So you came out after me, what, to check on me? To give me Haze? To find my sword?”

Jaide nodded again. “Yes, and in that order,” she said. “But also for another task.” She turned to look at Joen, staring intently, as if she meant to drill a hole through the girl with her eyes.

Joen matched her intensity, even took a step toward Jaide. For a long time their eyes locked on each other until finally, Jaide blinked and turned away.

“I also came to ask your good Captain Deudermont to arrest and detain the pirates he had on board, and not to honor his word to them.” She said it so simply, it took me a good moment to register her meaning.

“You told him to lock them up?” I said, unbelieving. “Even Joen?”

“Especially Joen,” she answered.

Two sounds stuck me in rapid succession: the airy burst of Joen’s horrified gasp and the soft sound of steel on leather as her daggers slid from their sheaths.

“Oi, you wanted me ... killed?” Joen said with difficulty. She advanced another step, her pose threatening. I moved



forward to intervene, but Jaide spoke first.

"Never that," she said. "I simply wished to keep you away from this place." Joen approached another step, but Jaide stood her ground, arms out wide, unthreatening.

"Keep me away, eh?" Joen snarled. "By whatever means?"

"Obviously not," Jaide answered. "I could have killed you any number of times or had you forcibly held in Silverymoon, or in the Tower of Twilight, or captured on the road. You have no idea the influence I could wield should I so desire."

"So why didn't you, then?" Joen pressed.

"I wanted him to come here." Jaide motioned to me. "I just hoped he would come alone."

Joen shook her head, either unsure or unbelieving.

I had it figured out, though. "You wanted me to take the stone because it wouldn't be bound to me," I said. "The Stone of Tymora is already bound to me, so the Stone of Beshaba would have no power over me. But now it's bound to Joen."

Jaide nodded. "After what I witnessed on that island, I knew she would follow you to the ends of the world if you should ask," she said.

I recalled my first experience with clairvoyance, the magic of distant seeing, also called scrying. I had sat in a darkened room in the back of an inn, watching through a crystal ball as Perrault, my mentor, had retrieved the Stone of Tymora from this very same elf. I should have known right from then that she was one of the Sentinels. Who else, after all, would be protecting the sacred stone? And my guide for that magical journey had been ...

"What happened to Alviss?" I asked.

Jaide's gaze dropped to the floor. "He tried to take the stone, but it was not meant for him," she said, a great sadness filling her voice. "That is why I wanted to keep you away, Joen. Not only because I feared it would bind to you but because I feared the stone may well kill you."

Joen's stance had slackened some. She no longer seemed ready to pounce at Jaide. She even sheathed her daggers, though she kept her hands near their hilts.

"None of this answers my question, though," I said. "Where do we go from here? I suppose you know who and where the other Sentinel is?"

"I do," Jaide answered. "But it is not in my power to tell you."

"Not in your power?"

She smiled, a sad smile if I'd ever seen one. "The goddesses put many blessings upon the Sentinels, but also many curses. We are not allowed to interfere with you, only to watch and to ensure the stones pass as they should. We cannot tell you of the other bearers, past or present, or of the other Sentinel."

"Oi, can't or won't?" Joen asked.

"There is no 'or,' " the elf replied. "There is no choice. You seem to forget, both of you, the nature of the goddess I have sworn to serve for all eternity. Tymora is not the goddess of quests or processes. She rules the sphere of fortune, and as such, she impels us all to seek our own fates, to make our own ways. What I can tell you, though, is that you already know the name of the other Sentinel."

Joen and I looked at each other and it was obvious she wanted me to say something, but all I could do was shrug. What was I to do, tell a priestess she was wrong in the way she'd served her goddess for centuries? She was right, and no matter how unfair it felt, I knew she wouldn't tell me. But that didn't mean I had any idea who the other Sentinel was, or why she thought I should know.

"Now come, dawn is not far off," Jaide said. "We should camp and rest, and set out in the morning."

"Set out for where?" Joen asked. "Oh, wait, don't tell me, you—"

"Pick a place," I cut in, thinking maybe I was finally starting to understand the nature of the goddess of luck.

“Anywhere, anywhere at all.”

We thought a moment.

“The Tower of Twilight,” I said at last. “We should inform Malchor of what’s happened, and we can stay there a while before we move on.”

Joen smiled, skipped over, and gave me a hug. She and Jaide moved—together, and not in anger—to Haze to unpack and set our camp.

But I wasn’t sure we were much better off with Jaide than we had been with Chrysaor.

## ***Part Three***



"I was wond'ring," the pirate captain said, "when ye'd mention this."

The sun peeked over the eastern horizon, illuminating the beach. The pirates' torches had long since burned out. I'd been speaking in the darkness since, but neither my audience nor I seemed to mind much.

"Mention what?" I turned to face him, to find him holding a small metal object.

My stiletto.

I growled slightly. "That doesn't belong to you," I said. "You don't deserve to hold it."

"No, I don't," he agreed, tossing it lightly to me. I was so stunned, I almost failed to catch the dagger.

"You'd return my weapon so easily?"

"Ye're already armed," he said. "Ye're outnumbered fifty ter one. Do ye think the weapon ye hold when we kill ye much matters?"

"So you do intend to kill me."

He laughed. "Yer story's nearly done, ain't it?"

"That's yet to be seen," I said, twirling my dagger about. "But tell me, what comes after that?"

He laughed again.

"Haven't ye already figured that out?"

"Well, then, I think this is where the story ends."

His eyes widened a bit. "Haven't we been over this?"

"If I don't tell you the story, it dies with me," I said. "Well, I think the rest of the story I'd rather let die."

For once, the pirate captain wasn't laughing. "Now, boy —," he started.

"Don't call me 'boy,' " I said. "The last one to call me that got run through." I flicked my wrist, and the magical blade

in my hand rippled and extended, stretching into a fine saber.

"Young man, then," he said. "I'm not sure ye know what ye think ye know."

"I know what pirates do to their prisoners."

"Do they arm their prisoners?" he asked, leading.

"Apparently so."

"No, and ye know it," he said. "We don't be meaning te kill ye, or ye'd already be dead."

"You want to hear my story, or I'd already be dead."

"Aye, a fine story it be. But, ye see, there be a shortage o' fine sailors on the seas these days."

"And you fear I might kill one of your fine sailors?"

"I think ye might be one o' them," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I might be one of who?"

"One o' our crew," he said. "If ye be wanting the job. We could use someone who knows the sea, with the eyes fer the crow's nest."

"I ... I," I stuttered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Join our crew," he said. "Tha' plain enough fer ye?"

"Yes," I said. "I mean, no. I mean, I get it, but I don't want it."

"Well, that be yer choice," he said. "But ye don't need fear us any longer."

"So you'll let me go?"

"Well, not jus' yet. We want ter hear the rest o' the story first."

"And when I finish, I can go? Why should I trust you?"

He did not smile, he did not laugh. He simply said, "The offer's good, young man. I got no grudge against ye, and nothing ter fear by letting ye go. Though I'd rather be adding ye to the crew."

"I think I've had enough of the sea," I said.

"And the story?"

"I've had enough of that too. But you asked, so here it is."

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Our journey back to the Tower of Twilight hadn't been especially difficult. The days were warming, and summer was nearly upon us by the time we arrived.

"What is she, anyway?" Joen asked, patting Haze's lush mane in Malchor Harpell's stable.

"She's a horse, stupid," I said.

Joen pulled back from Haze, and the horse nickered softly, shaking her head. Walking around the mare to where I stood, still brushing absently at the pristine mane, Joen punched me in the shoulder. Hard.

"Ow," I said, recoiling. "What was that for?"

"Calling me stupid," she said.

"If the shoe fits," I said.

She kicked me in the shin. "Oi, what about shoes?" she said, winding up for another kick.

"Hey, hey, stop already," I said, retreating a few steps. "You're not stupid. I'm sorry I said you were." I laughed a little, and Joen joined in.

"Oi, but really," she said. "A horse doesn't walk on water, you know? So what is she?"

I shrugged. I'd never heard nor read of any creature like Haze, and it never occurred to me to ask someone who might have the answer. "Malchor or Jaide would probably know better," I replied.



"I think she's an elemental," Joen said.

"Or maybe half-elemental. Like Chrysaor. Haze's great-great-grandmother was a sea horse or something."

"No," Joen said. "She's more pure than that. She's not touched by the elements, you know? She walks on the water like it's just ... natural, like she was born to it."

"The water walking actually tires her out," I said. "She can only do it for a short while."

"Well, if she's an elemental, she'd be from another plane, right?" Joen asked. "Like, from a place that's just water everywhere?"

"Maybe."

"So maybe she's just not used to this plane, or her magic doesn't work as well here or something like that."

I thought for a moment, then said, "No, I don't think that's it. If she were from a place that's just pure water, wouldn't she swim? And she's fine on land too. And there's that mist that rises from her hooves when she wants it to."

"Oi, I haven't seen that," Joen said, a bit of excitement in her voice. "Mist, eh?"

"Yeah," I said. "She can bring up a whole lot of it too. Like a big cloud rolling across the ground."

"Well, maybe she's all about the air, then," Joen thought aloud.

"Then she'd be able to fly."

Joen held her arms out to her sides like mock wings. "I'd love to fly," she said, closing her eyes and leaning forward as if into a strong wind.

I shrugged and said, "The land and the sea are enough for me."

"Enough?" she laughed. "You'd rather be tethered to the ground than free to fly?"

"To fly and to fall," I countered. "At least on land you know where you are."

"If I could fly, I wouldn't fall, eh?"

“Everything falls. Everything that climbs into the sky has to come back to the land. But all that flying, all that *freedom*”—I stressed the word sarcastically—“just means when you get back down, you don’t have a place to call your own.”

“Birds build nests, though,” Joen said.

I laughed. “If you could fly, would you build a nest?”

Joen thought for a moment then shook her head.

“See, that’s the problem with the freedom you want. You haven’t got a place to keep the things you need, the people you love. You haven’t got a home.”

“Oi, I’d rather take those things and people with me. Then wherever I am, that’s my home, eh?”

It was my turn to shake my head.

Before I could answer, the door to the stable swung open and Malchor Harpell walked in. “It’s both,” he said. “Haze is a creature of both air and water. And very astute of you two to figure that out, if I may say.”

He’d been meeting with Jaide in private while Joen and I had tended to Haze.

“Both?” I asked. “Air and water? Then where is she from?”

“She is from right here, on our very own Prime Material Plane,” Malchor said. “She was created of the elements of air and water and bound here by powerful magic.”

“Oi, if she’s made of magic, can she die?”

“She can be killed, certainly,” Malchor said.

“But could she just ... die of old age?” I asked.

Malchor shrugged. “It depends how she was created. But I doubt anyone powerful enough to bind her would want that. I’d rather expect that over time, her magic could simply fade away.”

“When?” Joen asked. “Why? What would make her fade away?”

“Could be she’s bound to a specific person or a specific thing. When that person or object is no more, the magic unravels. But if that were so, well, she wouldn’t still be

here." He stepped up to the horse and ran his hand along her flank.

We stood in silence for a good while, each admiring the beauty of Haze, each hoping she'd be with us for a good while longer. It occurred to me that she was my oldest friend. I'd met her when I was just an infant, when Perrault had taken me from my parents' ruined house and delivered me to Elbeth in the High Forest. The thought of her not being around any longer disturbed me greatly.

"Well, enough of all that," Malchor said at last. "I have guest rooms all ready for you, if you'd like to take some rest. How long do you plan to stay? My tower is open to you for as long as you'd like."

Joen shrugged, and I answered, "Not long."

"Very well, then. I'll show you to your rooms. You can get washed up, and we'll have a meal in an hour."

"Wait, Malchor," Joen said. "Are our old quarters open?"

"Yes, they are," he answered.

"Could we just take those instead of your guest rooms?"

Malchor smiled at her. "Of course, of course. You'll find all the doors unlocked. I'll see you in the great hall in an hour's time."

He bowed and left, and we walked in silence, following the old familiar path through the strange tower that had been our home for a year. As we approached the final door, the entry to the circular training hall, Joen hooked her arm through mine.

"I know who Haze is bound to," she said softly.

"She's not bound to me," I said. "She's older than I am."

"Of course," Joen said. "She's bound to Perrault."

That thought had crossed my mind, but I'd dismissed it. "You heard Malchor. If whoever she's bound to dies, she'd fade away. And Perrault is dead."

Joen stopped walking, pulling me to a halt beside her. "No he isn't," she said. She put her hand up to my chest.

"What, the stone?" I asked, skeptical.

She rolled her eyes, that familiar gesture of mock disdain I'd come to know so well. "No, stupid," she said. "Under the stone. He's alive in your heart, eh?"

I stared at her for a long time, then unhooked my arm from hers. I tried to say something, but couldn't push the words past the lump in my throat.

So instead, I punched her in the shoulder. Hard. "I'm not stupid," I said. I tried to say it casually, but my voice cracked somewhere in the simple statement.

Joen chuckled and rolled her eyes again, and pushed past me and into the room. She skipped off to her quarters, and I followed suit, heading to my old room to wash off the dirt of the road and the single tear I couldn't hold back.



"Oi, are you going back to Baldur's Gate?" Joen asked of Jaide, who sat across from her at the table. Malchor's great hall looked much the same as when we'd first arrived here more than a year ago. A feast of magnificent proportions covered the massive table. Malchor and Jaide sat side by side, with Joen and me opposite them.

"No," Jaide answered. "My duties there are at an end."

"What were those duties, anyway?" I asked.

Jaide hesitated. "It is the task of the Sentinels to watch the bearers of the stones, usually from afar," she said. "Not to interfere, but to ensure that the stones pass on as their wielders die."

"Oi, that's a bit morbid," Joen said.

Jaide laughed. "I held the Stone of Tymora for you," she said, motioning toward me, "until such time as you were ready. And I have now witnessed the Stone of Beshaba's passing as well. So until one or both of you pass on, I have no task but to watch."

"But you can watch from Baldur's Gate," I said.

“Or I can watch from up close,” she answered. “Usually the Sentinels keep their identities hidden from the bearers, but since you both know me ...” She let the thought trail off with a shrug.

“And not to interfere?” I said suspiciously.

Again, she just shrugged.

I let the subject drop, and the conversation soon shifted to the future. Joen still pressed for a return to the sea, and Jaide thought that a fine idea. I joined the discussion only halfheartedly. I knew exactly where I wanted to be going next and exactly what I had to do. I couldn’t believe that Tymora’s Sentinel would allow me to destroy the stone, but I couldn’t escape the feeling that only Jaide could lead me to the magic I would need to do just that. Having her along would give me time to try to convince her, or trick her, into pointing me in the right direction.

After the meal, as we exited the great hall, Malchor put his hand on my shoulder, holding me back. Jaide and Joen paid little heed—they chatted like old friends, wandering off to wherever. The change from when they’d first met, on the deck of *Sea Sprite*, was remarkable. Then, Joen had taken a dislike to Jaide for no good reason and with no real explanation. But not long after Jaide teleported us out of the cavern, they had become as thick as thieves. In fact, I found myself a little jealous.

“You seem disinterested, my friend,” Malchor said as the two disappeared around a corner.

“Disinterested in what?” I asked.

“In the future. Joen is excited, and even your elf friend is interested in where you’ll go next. But you ...” He let the thought trail off.

I shrugged. “They’re acting as if it’s all over,” I said. I put my hand to my chest, to the sash cradling the stone against my heart. I said nothing, but Malchor understood the gesture.

“You still intend to destroy it,” he said.

"I do," I answered. "But Joen has no past with the stones. The grief they bring, the destruction. She wasn't there when Perrault died, or when Asbeel burned the forest around me and Elbeth, or when my parents—"

"Her parents are dead as well," Malchor said sagely. "They have been since she was young, just like your own. Ill fortune falls on all of us from time to time, not just those who carry magical stones."

"It just falls on some more often than others," I said.

"Wise words. But will destroying the stones necessarily change that?"

"Yes," I answered. "I never wanted this. It's just by bad luck that I came to have it. If I can destroy it, I can take control of my own fortune."

Malchor was shaking his head before I'd even finished. "It will not change what has already happened."

"But it will prevent it from happening again, to me or to someone else."

Malchor blew a long sigh. "I'm not going to deter you from this, am I?"

"No."

"Well, then I may as well help direct your path."

"You have information?" I asked, a bit shocked. "Did Jaide tell you where the other Sentinel is?"

"No and no," he answered. "But I can find out with a magical ritual. It will require three things, though."

"Another test? I have to prove I'm worthy of your information again?"

"No, nothing like that." Malchor laughed, a strained sound void of mirth. "You've long since proven your worth. I simply require some components for the ritual. First, I need a lock of hair from the one Sentinel. Second, I need Joen's blood. Just a drop will do."

"And third?" I asked.

He paused a long moment before answering. "I need a name," he said.

“But I don’t know the name.”

“Jaide indicated to me that you’ve met the other Sentinel.”

“Yeah, she told me the same thing.”

“Well, think hard, then. Meet me in my quarters just before the midnight hour with the required components, and I’ll help guide your path.” He took his hand from my shoulder and walked away, leaving me to think.

I’ve met the other Sentinel, I thought. But who?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“My hair?” Jaide asked skeptically.

I nodded, standing uncomfortably in Jaide’s austere bedchamber.

“You intend to do some magic, don’t you?”

I nodded again.

Jaide studied me for a long time. “I’m surprised, I must admit,” she said. “I expected you to engage in some attempt to steal a lock of my hair. I certainly didn’t think you’d just come right out and ask.”

I shrugged.

“Why didn’t you?” she asked, unfastening the tie that held her hair to one side, and pulling a small razor from the shelf beside her. She had taken one of Malchor’s finest guest rooms, complete with a washroom and a full kit of grooming supplies.

*You can read my mind, I thought but didn’t say. How can I sneak up on you if you can hear me coming?*

Jaide smiled and didn’t answer. She brought the razor to her hair, cleanly severed a lock, and handed the hair to me.

*But how will you get the other components?* I heard her voice ask in my head. *The girl will not likely give you her blood so easily.*

Surprised, I asked aloud, “How do you know what else I need?”



"I gave our host the ritual," she answered.

I blinked a few times. "But you, the Sentinel of Tymora of all people, have known all along that I mean to destroy your goddess's artifact. And for all your talk about just watching, not being able to help us, you've helped us all along."

It was Jaide's turn to shrug. She turned away from me to the mirror on the wall.

I considered pressing her, but I figured she'd been as forthcoming as I could have hoped for, and far more than I'd expected.

"I need a name," I couldn't resist saying. "Who is the other Sentinel?"

"I've told you before," she said. "I can't fight your battles. That is for you to do."

"But you can give Malchor the ritual that will tell me who the Sentinel is?"

Jaide laughed. "I don't make the rules," she said.

*No*, I thought, not caring that she could hear, *you just bend them*.



She moved slowly, fluidly, each twist the natural extension of the previous, each setting up the next. The glint of metal from her hands, the daggers weaving and cutting, only amplified the mesmerizing effect of her dance. Forward, back, high, now low, she attacked, her blades striking the various arms of the practice dummy with perfect precision.

The room was much as we'd known it for a year. In the center of the circular chamber the oddly shaped, segmented, many-armed pillar stood impassively, accepting of its role as the victim of Joen's deadly dance.

Her tempo increased. The grace of her movements didn't suffer with speed. If anything, she seemed more fluid, more hypnotic. I stood in the doorway in a state of awe at how fine a fighter she'd become.

And I wondered how it would affect my plan.

I watched for a while as Joen went through her routines. She practiced with her daggers each night before bed while we were on the road, but only simple, slow attack and defense routines to keep her muscles in shape, to keep her memory sharp. She seemed grateful to once again have the dummy to spar with, to have a focal point for her energy. And she seemed grateful too, to have the full run of the room. She circled constantly, a slow waltz punctuated by occasional sharp sidesteps, usually followed by a devastating attack.

But not always. That was the beauty of her dance. Her moves flowed so well together, but not predictably. Anything she did, she could follow with a number of other moves—forward or back, attack or defense, it all blurred together.

Again she upped the tempo, her daggers a blur, her arms weaving together so quickly I was surprised she didn't tie herself into knots. But she remained precise, and the dull thump of steel on wood echoed through the room. She stepped to her left and stabbed out hard. She cut back to the right, and brought her daggers across in a quick cut. She stepped back then skipped forward, one blade high, the other low. Then, with a flourish, she spun a full circle, dizzyingly fast—and her foot slipped on the wood floor, sending her sprawling painfully to the floor. I gasped and she grunted. Her dagger came out of her grip and skidded across the floor, almost cutting her. She closed her eyes and groaned as she rolled over onto her back, gingerly touching bruises and pulled muscles.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She didn't answer or even look at me at first. Instead she drew the deep black stone from her belt pouch and was about to throw it against the wall, but something made her stop herself. She looked down at it and I thought she was going to cry, but she sniffed and wiped her nose on the back

of her hand, and put the stone back into the pouch. She looked up at me finally and said, "It'll kill me eventually."

I nodded.

"Dummy's all yours if you wanna spar, eh?" she said. "Maybe get familiar with your new—your old blade, you know?"

"It's all right," I said. "And I do want to spar. But not with the dummy."

She looked at me curiously, then turned her gaze to a rack set against a wall in the back of the room. The rack held fake weapons carved of wood that were magically enchanted to hold the same balance as their real counterparts. A saber and several daggers rested among the collection, along with many others.

"You'll have an advantage," she said. "I'm tired, you know?"

"So will that be your excuse when I beat you, or the whole bad luck thing?"

She grinned slightly, gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes, and scrambled to her feet and headed for the weapon rack. I followed her. She walked with confidence, even anticipation, but my knees shook.

Joen pulled a pair of daggers from the rack, twirling them to test their weight and balance. Apparently satisfied with her choices, she walked to the middle of the room. "So what are the rules, then?" she asked as I approached the collection of weapons. "First blood?"

Hopefully, I thought. "Until one or the other yields," I said. I took the only saber from the weapon rack. It was balanced to match my previous blade, so it was a bit heavier than the magical sword I once again carried. But it was familiar, at least.

Our first passes resembled her dance with the pillar. She stepped to her left and I matched her, keeping her in front of me. She moved back to the right and I moved with her. We

rotated around each other in a slow dance, sizing each other up.

She darted forward, right arm extended, left tucked in close to her body. I stepped back, bringing my blade up to defend myself. Her straightforward thrust wasn't difficult to parry. My blade connected from below with hers, and the sharp crack of wood on wood echoed in the large chamber. I forced her blade up and out, her blade swishing harmlessly through the air near my head. I stepped to my left with the motion of the parry, keeping her body between me and her other dagger. But she didn't press the attack, instead withdrawing her extended arm.

I followed suit, bringing my saber back into a defensive position. I could have attacked, but her footing was good and her daggers still in place to deflect anything I could throw at her.

She stepped back and I stepped back, and we began our circling dance again.

"Thought I could end it quick, you know?" she said. "I want to get to bed soon."

"Don't worry," I answered. "It'll be over before you know what hit you."

"Oi, 'cause nothing's gonna hit me, eh?"

I lunged forward before she finished her taunt. The tip of my sword leaped at her face pulling my whole body out into a single line in perfect balance. My weapon covered the four feet to her in an instant. If she'd been distracted at all, as I'd hoped, she may not have been able to react to such a sudden attack.

But she was not distracted. She bent backward at the waist, taking advantage of my high angle of attack. Both her daggers came up in front of her, crossed, and braced against her forearms. Her blades, like mine before, defeated the attack from below, forcing my blade up and away from her body.

She continued to bend backward, sliding one foot out behind her to maintain her balance. She rolled one dagger under my blade, the other over. She then shifted her weight onto her back leg, sliding her forward leg out to the left, turning her body with it, so her side was to me.

If I'd had control of my blade, I could have taken advantage of her position. But I discovered that I couldn't move it at all against her surprisingly effective lock. Instead, I found my sword moving with her, across my body. She would disarm me soon, I knew.

I couldn't attack her, nor could I retreat to my defensive posture, and she knew it. I could see the confident smile creeping onto her face.

I couldn't move backward, so I moved forward instead. I pushed, lowering my right shoulder and slamming hard into her.

Joan, surprised by my move and stunned by the impact, tumbled away. She managed to turn her rough landing into a barrel roll, absorbing much of the impact. But she lost a dagger in the process. She came to her feet, looking a bit shocked and possibly even angry.

"Oi, so that's how it's gonna be, eh?" she said sharply. "I thought we were gonna be civil."

I grimaced. I didn't want to upset Joan, but neither could I accomplish my plan without causing her some injury.

"I'll be civil," I said quietly. "I'll even let you get your other dagger."

"How gracious," she said.

She retrieved her lost blade and set herself again in a defensive stance. Again our dance resumed.

This time, though, was a bit different. Our pace was faster. Step right, step right, step forward. We each launched a few short attacks, though nothing as ambitious as our first exchanges. Wood struck wood, and feet scuffed on the stone floor.

As we settled into a give-and-take routine, two things became obvious to me: First, Joen wasn't really very tired from her sparring with the dummy. And second, she was the superior fighter. It was only a matter of time before I made a mistake and she took advantage. This would all be for nothing, and I'd need a whole new plan.

I moved forward, chopping my blade down diagonally from the right. Joen had previously deflected that simple attack, but this time, she simply sidestepped it, moving out to her left.

She darted forward, a mirror image of her first attack. Her left-hand dagger led the way. Her right, she kept close to her body.

I halted the momentum of my sword easily, around my left hip, and reversed it. I put my right hand flat against the blade to balance it, turning my right elbow in low, pointed at Joen. I rolled my left hip forward as well, sliding my right foot back behind me. The hilt of my sword stayed against my hip, but the blade came around, turning with me, striking her dagger just before it would have stabbed my shoulder.

I extended my left arm, but left the sword's tip in place. The pommel of the weapon was farther from my body than the tip, and the whole length of the blade pointed at Joen.

I snapped the tip toward her, the blade cutting the air. But her right-hand dagger, still close to her body, was perfectly aligned, and she picked the attack off cleanly.

She brought her left hand back in toward me, her deflected dagger once again diving for my side. I had no choice but to slide to my left, away from the attack.

Though my body was out of her reach, she continued the motion, bringing her left dagger up beside the right, against my blade. With both hands and good leverage, she shoved my blade up and out. I tried to retreat but she mirrored my every move, pulling her body in close to mine. I tried in vain to maneuver my sword, to bring the blade in between us, to somehow break the clinch.

She pressed in tighter, one dagger holding tight to my blade, the other sliding down toward my chest. I could see the fire in her emerald eyes as her face came in close. I could feel her breath against my skin, her long hair brushing gently against my face.

She brought her dagger in against my chest, and her mouth a mere inch from my ear. "Yield," she whispered.

Every part of me wished to do so. She had beaten me, and I knew it. Were we real foes with real weapons, I would have been dead. I would have yielded, but I had other plans. I grasped the hilt of my sword in both hands, and tugged mightily on the pommel. I couldn't overpower her parry, but I didn't have to. I didn't need the blade of my saber. Either end of a sword hurts.

Joen's eyes widened in disbelief as the pommel of my wooden weapon rushed in, crashing against her face, knocking her off her feet.

She landed hard. Her two wooden daggers, suddenly free of her grip, clattered against the floor. Both hands covered her face, and she rolled around for a few moments in apparent agony.

Then she stopped, opened a space between her hands, and looked at me.

I expected anger, even rage. I thought she might get up and attack me. But behind those hands, her eyes were moist with tears. Behind the tears, her look was one of disappointment, of betrayal, not of rage.

I could hardly bear to look at her. I averted my eyes, backing slowly, expecting but not getting some harsh words from her, about how I'd cheated, how I should have yielded, how I was a terrible person.

But when she managed to sit up, all she said was, "Got that blood you came looking for?"

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "Jaide?"

She forced a smile and nodded.

Feeling like a fool, I turned and left, walking out of the room still holding the wooden sword—with the blood from Joen's broken nose on the pommel.



## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

Midnight could not come soon enough. I arrived at Malchor's study early—I couldn't return to my room, so close to Joen's, so soon—but found the door locked. So I sat and waited, with a lock of Jaide's hair in one hand and the bloody practice saber in the other.

I couldn't stand to look at the weapon, to think about the awful thing I'd done to Joen, the crunching sound her nose made when it broke.

I tried to divert my mind, to focus on the third object, the one I had not yet found: the name of the other Sentinel.

It was someone I knew, Jaide had said. I knew a good many people—the crew of *Sea Sprite*, the various folk I'd met on my previous travels with Perrault, even a few interesting folk from Memnon and Calimport who'd helped or hindered my journeys. But I seriously doubted the Sentinel could be Sali Dalib, the merchant I'd stolen my magical boots from; or Dondon, the halfling disguised as a street orphan; or the nameless seer in the market in Memnon.

I also knew the Sentinel still lived, so that ruled out Perrault and Alviss, and a few others.

So who, then?

My first thought ran to Captain Deudermont and the crew of *Sea Sprite*. I'd met them soon after the stone had come into my possession—actually, almost immediately after I'd

lost Perrault. They had taken me in, protected me, though I was a stowaway on their vessel.

But my meeting them had been due to my actions, not theirs. I'd taken shelter from the demon Asbeel and hidden in the hold for days, only to be discovered after a battle with pirate raiders in which I was wounded. The Sentinels know where the stones are at all times, Jaide had revealed to me. If any on board had sensed the stone, they surely did not show it.

But maybe the Sentinel wouldn't have wanted to reach out to me then. As Jaide said, the Sentinels were meant to be observers in all this. But still, someone could have come to my aid during the fight instead of letting me battle a nasty troll all alone—and nearly die.

And, of course, I was still angry with Deudermont for what he'd done to Joen as we approached Waterdeep.

No, I decided, it was no one on board *Sea Sprite* when I'd arrived. Not Lucky or Tonnid or McCanty or Tasso. Not Deudermont. And that also meant it was neither Drizzt nor Wulfgar, who had also been on board at the time.

I was a bit disheartened at the realization that it couldn't be Drizzt Do'Urden. Our fates seemed somehow connected. For the past few years, we'd run into each other on several occasions. Always we were heading in the same direction, be it south to Calimshan or north to Silverymoon.

And besides, I thought the world of the dark elf. He always had words of encouragement or advice for me, sometimes even some real aid to my cause.

But I had confronted him about a connection to the Stone of Tymora, which had been suggested by the seer in Memnon. And he'd told me, honestly I believe, that he didn't know of what I spoke.

The midnight hour had arrived, but still Malchor did not appear. I thought about knocking at his door, but decided to wait a little longer.

I was missing something. Jaide thought I knew enough to figure out who the Sentinel was. She wanted me to continue my journey, for whatever reason.

Drizzt wasn't the Sentinel, but what of his friends? Bruenor Battlehammer, the dwarf warrior and now King of Mithral Hall, had arrived during the fight with the pirates. He'd ridden in on a flying chariot of fire, along with his adopted human daughter, Catti-brie. How had they found us, exactly? Of course, considering their means of transport it wasn't unreasonable to assume magical aid, but what if Bruenor knew exactly where I was? Or, more precisely, exactly where the stone I carried was.

I considered their arrival in a whole new light. I'd always assumed they'd been searching for Drizzt. But what if they had been actually searching for me?

Bruenor had never interacted with me much. He'd been cordial, though not especially polite—but of course, dwarven politeness is a contradiction. Catti-brie, though ... When I lay wounded among the injured from the fight, when the ship's surgeon—or the sailor taking on that role—had used burning tar to seal my wound so that I wouldn't bleed out, it had been her angelic face that had watched over me, her hand that held mine.

And she was indeed beautiful. Malchor had said the goddesses had chosen two persons of exceeding grace as the Sentinels. Jaide surely fit the description. And Catti-brie would as well.

No, I realized. I was remembering what Malchor said incorrectly. Not “persons” of exceeding grace, but “elves” of exceeding grace. And Catti-brie was human. She was less than a decade older than I. She couldn't be the Sentinel.

Frustrated, I pounded the door, hard. My toe stung from the blow, but the sharp pain gave me something to focus my mind on. I didn't know many elves—only one, really—and I already knew she was a Sentinel. It couldn't be Elbeth, my next possibility, or any member of her Circle, or any of the

people I'd met in my travels in Calimshan, or Chrysaor the genasi—

I stopped. I didn't actually know for sure that Chrysaor was a genasi. Robillard, the wizard, had told me so. In fact, not everything I knew about genasi necessarily fit with what I knew of Chrysaor.

A genasi is of elemental heritage, and I'd always assumed Chrysaor was descended from a creature of elemental water. As Robillard had said, somewhere in his lineage there was a water nymph, or something of that nature. The physical characteristics of the genasi were determined by that heritage. Chrysaor's skin and hair color seemed to fit, as did his seafaring tendencies.

But he also could breathe underwater and swim extraordinarily fast. He was more at home beneath the sea than on land. And this would not be true of a genasi.

On the other hand, there was a race of elves who lived beneath the seas, with pale blue skin and hair that ranged in color from green to white, including the sea-foam coloring of Chrysaor. Malchor had not specifically labeled the Sentinels as moon elves like Jaide, or even surface elves. An aquatic elf would not be out of the question, surely.

And I considered Chrysaor's actions too. We'd first met in the brig of the old *Sea Sprite*, in Memnon harbor. He'd been among the pirates who had attacked us. He had tried to kidnap me—had even succeeded in taking me off the ship, underwater into the harbor, and may have escaped cleanly had not Robillard come to my rescue.

Each time I'd met him after that, he'd not tried to kill me, but had actually aided my journey. He led me to the stone, guiding me to the isle where the Circle held it. He had helped Joen and me get to Malchor's tower. He'd then led us to the Stone of Beshaba, buried beneath the sands of Anauroch. His every action seemed to be about bringing the bearers, current and future, to the stones.

Yes, it all made sense. Chrysaor was the other Sentinel.

Malchor's door swung open. The wizard stood in fine ceremonial robes, a censer in hand, a grave look on his face.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I nodded. But something nagged at me, something Jaide had said. But I couldn't quite place it.



I winced as the knife sliced my finger, but I made no noise, as Malchor had instructed. The study was dark except for a single candle set on the table in the center of the room. Scented smoke from the censer filled the small, round chamber. Two bowls also sat on the table, one in front of each of us. In mine, there was only crystal clear water. In Malchor's was the lock of Jaide's hair and a few scrapings of the stains of Joen's blood. As I held my hand across the table, a few drops of my blood joined the mix.

Malchor chanted, his voice low. I could barely make out individual words in the chant, and couldn't understand those I could distinguish—he spoke in some arcane language. He would chant for some time, he'd told me, and when he finished, the light would go out. And at that moment and that moment only, I would say the name of the other Sentinel. If I was correct, his image would appear in the water of my bowl, hopefully with some way of describing his location.

Why we had to go through all this elaborate ritual, I was not sure. I'd seen scrying magic used nearly two years ago, when Alviss had helped me spy on Perrault and Jaide. But that spying was directed at Perrault, not Jaide. Maybe it was more difficult to use such magic to find a Sentinel. I had no idea.

I trained my thoughts on Chrysaor, tried to convince myself that I was certain. He always seemed able to find me, he knew where Twinspire was, he actively wanted us to find the Stone of Beshaba. He was the perfect candidate.

But still a doubt tugged on my mind.

Why had he led me to the Circle, the druids who were determined to keep me and the Stone of Tymora hidden forever, in order to restore balance to the world? And when that plan had failed, why would he have helped us seek the Stone of Beshaba?

And when that was achieved, when we entered the cavern at Twinpire, he left.

Twinpire. Where we'd met Jaide. She'd said something ...  
Shark bite.

Jaide had a nick on her ear. She had been wearing her hair to cover it since, and the excuse was unconvincing. A shark had bitten her, she'd said. Wouldn't a nick from a sword be more likely?

I tried to visualize the nick and found it remarkably ready in my mind's eye. And it was not clean, not a cut like a fine sword or a dagger would make. It was the sort of thing a serrated blade might make as it pulled past her head and caught her ear.

And there was something she'd said when I asked for a name. "That is for you to do," she'd told me. It was the second time she'd used that phrase.

The first had been when I'd asked her to kill—

Malchor's chant rose to a crescendo and the candlelight disappeared, snuffed in a blink. It was time for me to say the name.

Chrysaor, my brain yelled. It must be. It can't be who you think it is. He's dead. He's gone. He's not the Sentinel.

But I knew it in my heart, and couldn't stop myself from saying it aloud.

"Asbeel."

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY***

"I'm not going with you." Joen put her hand on the strap of Haze's saddle as I was tightening it.

"You'll be cursed with bad luck for the rest of your life unless we destroy these stones," I said, pushing her hand away and continuing my work. "You have to come with me."

She punched me in the shoulder, but not very hard. "You're dumb, you know? Do you even have a plan?"

"Asbeel is in Baldur's Gate. He's the other Sentinel."

"That ain't a plan."

"I'll make him destroy the stones."

"Oi, make him? Make him how?"

"I've beaten him before."

"We," she corrected me. "We beat him before—with help from Robillard. And just barely, eh?"

I shrugged. "I've learned a lot since then."

"Not enough, though. He'll kill you!" She let out a sort of half gasp, half sob, then brought her hand to cover her mouth.

I stopped what I was doing and stared at her. Tears rimmed her emerald eyes. She brought an arm up to wipe the tears away, but that only made her crying more obvious. She tried in vain to keep her sobs down, to keep a straight, tough face.

"I have a say in this," Joen said, her voice barely a whisper. "We should just move on, you know? We can live with this. We can be free."

"No," I answered. "We can't be free. These stones, these curses, will always be there to bind us unless we do something about it. Unless I do something about it."

She was shaking her head before I finished. "There's always something, eh? If it ain't the stones, something else will make bad things happen. It's just life."

"Then we need to make something good happen instead."

"I'm not coming with you," Joen said again.

"Fine, then," I said, turning back to my work. "I'll just have to do this alone." Joen turned and bolted for the door. She meant her exit to be dramatic, I knew, but it didn't go so well. Her ankle tangled in one of the straps of Haze's bridle that was lying on the floor beside the mare, and Joen stumbled and nearly fell headlong into the door. She, graceful Joen, would have slammed her face into the wood, already-broken nose leading the way, if the door hadn't opened.

Instead, she crashed into Jaide's ankles, nearly bringing the elf tumbling down beside her.

I trotted over as Jaide helped Joen back to her feet. The girl brought her hand to her face in a futile attempt to stem the trickle of blood from her nose.

"See?" I said. "Would you have fallen like that if not for the cursed stone you carry?"

"Yeth," she said, her voice slurred under the gushing blood. "You bwoke my nothe, with ow without the thtone."

"Yeah, and you're so clumsy, you always trip over lines and fall into doors. Nothing new there."

She punched me again.

"I am sorry about the nose, though," I said. "I had to do it to—"

"Thneak off without me and pewfowm a thecwet wital to find out whewe Athbeel ith, I know," Joen finished for me.



I stared blankly at her for a few moments.

"She said," Jaide spoke up, "you snuck off without her to perform a secret ritual to find out where Asbeel is."

"I know what she said," I lied. I turned to face Joen. "Does that mean you accept my apology?"

Joen looked at me for a long time in silence. The blood stopped flowing, and she took her hand away from her face, grabbing a rag to wipe up the last of the liquid. Finally, she nodded her assent.

"Good," I said. "Now, I have work to do." I went back to Haze, fitting her saddle tightly. There was strength in the horse's eyes, and she offered no complaint as I prepared her for the road. She would carry me to the Gate and help me avenge Perrault once and for all.

"Maimun," Jaide said from the door. "There is something we must discuss."

"Can it wait?" I said, not looking at her.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"No," I answered. "I'll join you after I've finished with Asbeel."

"You don't make the rules," she said.

"My horse won't carry us both. I plan to go very fast."

"However fast you can go, I can go faster."

"And then what?" I asked. "You intend to help me fight Asbeel? I thought you couldn't fight my battles."

"I can't. But you're forgetting you need both Sentinels to perform the ritual and destroy the stones. And both stones too. I have to come."

"Joen's already decided not to come," I said. "So I'll have to just capture Asbeel, I suppose, and bring him back to you. You and Joen can go to Waterdeep. I'll meet you there with the demon."

"Oi," Joen said. "Don't be stupid. I'm going to come with you too so you don't get killed, you know?"

I smiled at her, but she didn't smile back. She turned on her heel and walked out of the stable.



We reached Baldur's Gate on Midsummer's Eve, just as the sun set. We approached from the east as the sun descended just behind the city, lighting up the towers and spires as if they were beautiful golden candles. The temple district, up on the hill and full of grand structures of marble and stone, looked especially wondrous.

"Where is Asbeel?" I asked Jaide. "You can sense him, right?"

"No, I cannot," she answered.

"I thought the Sentinels could always sense each other."

"Not when we're under the protection of one of the goddesses," she said, "the blessed sanctum of a temple dedicated to Tymora or Beshaba. When we seek shelter there, the connection is lost."

"Ah, so that's why you needed me to do the ritual," I said. "You knew he was hiding at a temple, but you didn't know which one."

"Oi," Joen cut in, "you mean the ritual where he had to break my nose?" There was an edge to her tone, though I couldn't tell if it was anger or simply sarcasm.

Jaide laughed lightly, apparently thinking it was the latter. "Yes, that one. Though he didn't have to break your nose, he just needed some of your blood."

I shrugged. "If I'd asked nicely, would you have helped me?"

Joen didn't answer and I cringed at the thought that I'd hurt her for no reason.

"It's also why," Jaide said, "I have for so long stayed here, in the Lady's Hall in Baldur's Gate."

"And why you kept the Stone of Tymora there," I reasoned. "Until you thought I was ready to take it."

She nodded.

"Oi, does Baldur's Gate have a temple to Beshaba?" Joen asked.

"No," Jaide said. "Few cities have organized temples to the Lady of Ill Fate."

"Well, then we know where he is, eh?"

"We should probably find lodgings for the night," I said. "We're tired from the journey, after all."

"Asbeel knows where we are," Jaide said. "I cannot sense him, but he can sense me and both stones. He knows we've come, and he won't give us a night to rest."

"We should at least put Haze up," I said.

"The temple can lodge her," Jaide answered. "Come, I'll lead the way."

## **CHAPTER *TWENTY-ONE***

The tremendous double doors swung open silently with ease and grace that belied their massive size. The chamber beyond was equally massive, its walls and ceiling barely visible in the dim light of our torch and the dimmer light of the single candle resting on the altar at the far end of the room. The floor was pristine marble, white as snow, with swirls of pink and blue dancing across it in no discernable pattern. A single figure wrapped in a white cloak, hood pulled over his head, knelt before the altar.

This scene seemed so familiar, yet so foreign. I'd last looked upon this room two years ago this very night. Then, it had been Jaide kneeling at the altar and Perrault walking through the door. I'd only seen the room through Alviss's magical crystal ball, and how grand it had appeared. This time, though, from this angle, it seemed far larger and far less grand.

Joen and I stood frozen in the doorway, but Jaide walked confidently, her footsteps echoing in the cavernous room.

"Come," she whispered to us, and we each took a step forward.

"Yes," said the figure at the altar, his voice low and imposing. "Do come. It has been so long since I've seen you."

He rose to his feet, shrugged off the white cloak, and turned to face us. He was a mere silhouette against the candlelight behind him, but I knew the shape well enough: bald head, sharp features, pointed ears.

Asbeel.

"Not long enough," I practically shouted. "You should be dead."

"Yes, I should," he answered. "But so should you, many times over. We each have Tymora to thank for our lives." He walked out from the altar, and the light seemed to follow him—no, to grow with him. The walls, the floor, the ceiling all glowed with a dim white light that only grew as he approached. The light revealed the whole expanse of the room, the white columns lining the walls, and the alcoves with smaller altars and carvings and etchings of words, poems or prayers, I could not tell.

It also revealed the speaker—not Asbeel's red-tinted skin, sharp-toothed mouth, and twisted face. It revealed the pale skin of a moon elf, one of Jaide's kin.

I had long wondered what type of creature Asbeel really was. His demonic appearance had certainly suggested he was a being of the lower planes, but he didn't fit exactly with any of the types I knew about. Could it have been that his demon form was but an illusion? That he was truly an elf?

"Dear sister," the elf who was Asbeel continued. "At long last you've brought them both to me."

"She didn't bring us," I said.

"Oi, we've both faced you before," Joen added.

"Not you, fools," he said, his voice smooth and calm. "You are not relevant. I was speaking of the blessed stones."

"The bearers brought the stones of their own free will," Jaide said.

"Whatever helps you sleep, sister," Asbeel answered.

"We did," I said. "We brought them, and we're going to make you destroy them."

"Nothing would please me more."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Asbeel laughed, a hearty laugh filled with mirth, something completely foreign to my experience of him. Always before, his laugh had been a horrid, grating thing.

"Have you truly learned so much and yet so little?" he said. "Next you'll tell me she hasn't even revealed how the ritual occurs!"

Jaide spoke before I could answer. "One of the bearers must kill one of the Sentinels, the Sentinel who watches his specific stone."

"Not a problem, then," Joen said, drawing her daggers and moving toward Asbeel. Jaide reached out an arm and held her back.

"Not here," she said softly.

"And why would you care that it not be here, sister?" Asbeel asked. "This is not the home of your Lady, after all."

"What's that supposed to mean, eh?" Joen asked.

Again Asbeel laughed that mirthful laugh, which I found somehow more unsettling than the wretched chortle I was used to. "It's worse than even I suspected!" he said. "My dear sister never even told you which goddess she serves? Oh, how cruel!"

My gut clenched tight. I did my best to keep a straight face, to not let Asbeel know his words had surprised me. But they surprised me all right, and the fact that one corner of Jaide's lips curled up in a touch of a smile, and that she didn't refute Asbeel's claim, made the blood run cold in my veins. I was so wrong, for so long, in so many ways. I was wrong about Perrault, then too, wasn't I? Wasn't it he who had put me in contact with Jaide, a servant of an evil goddess? Could he have known? Why would he have done that?

"You've all been manipulating me," I said, my voice tight in my throat. "You've lied to me over and over again, cursed me, pushed me around, put me in harm's way, led me here

against my will. So she serves Beshaba, and you serve Tymora. That changes nothing."

"It changes everything!" he said, his manner maddeningly jovial.

"All it changes is who gets the pleasure of killing you," I said, drawing my magical stiletto—the stiletto I'd inherited from Perrault.

"Not here," Jaide said again, more forcefully.

"She's masked the truth from you, my dear sister has, and overstepped her bounds as much as I have."

"Why do you keep calling her sister?" Joen asked.

"Because," Jaide answered, "he is my brother by birth."

"Twins, you see," Asbeel continued. "The goddesses chose twins to bear their blessing."

"It is a curse," Jaide said.

"You no more believe that than I do."

"Oi, why not just stop, then?" Joen asked. "Just ignore your goddesses, you know?"

"Oh, he did," Jaide said. "That's why his appearance is so twisted beyond these walls. That's the punishment he suffers."

"You should suffer as I do," Asbeel said, his voice low and menacing, all traces of mirth gone from it. "You betrayed the charge as thoroughly as I did. More so, even."

"You seek the bearers of your sacred stone so that you may kill them," Jaide said, revulsion obvious in her tone.

"To facilitate the passage of the stones to their rightful bearers, this is our divine task. You, though, you tried to stop it entirely."

"Stop it?" I asked.

Jaide sighed. "I suppose it's time you knew everything. You see, your parents were my dear friends—as was Perrault, Alviss, and Elbeth. We adventured together—many years ago. And then one day your mother found the Stone of Tymora. And everything changed. Asbeel killed your mother, and your father when he tried to defend her, to facilitate the

passage of the stone to someone of his choosing. But the stone bound to you before Asbeel could stop it. Asbeel was furious. And I was horrified. You were so young. Too young. When I heard what had happened, I had Perrault deliver the stone to me and hide you away. When you turned twelve, he felt you were ready to bear the stone and let the goddess's will reign. I feared the stone's power would be too much for you, but I felt it could not be lost. I had a responsibility to bear, and I had hoped Asbeel would relent. But then Perrault died." Jaide glared at Asbeel. "And I no longer wanted to take part in the havoc the stones wreck on their bearers' lives. Elbeth convinced me she could help, she and the Circle would take the stone back and protect you, but when that didn't work, and you escaped the island with the stone, I came to find you, to push you on your way. If this was to end, the ritual was the only way. But you had to discover it for yourself."

I swallowed. I had longed for answers for so long, but this was almost too much to bear. And there was still one thing that didn't make sense to me. "What about Chrysaor? Was he working for you all along?"

Jaide shrugged. "Chrysaor was helping both Elbeth and me to push you on your way, when we couldn't risk revealing ourselves to you."

Joen held out the black stone in her hand. "How does this thing fit into all this?"

"Not long after Perrault died, the last bearer of the Stone of Beshaba passed away, of natural causes, and so I hid it away," Jaide said. "In the one place in all the world where it could not seek a new soul."

"Twinspire," Asbeel growled. "I should have known it was there."

"The place where the goddesses first bound the stones to mortals, and the two of us to the stones," Jaide continued. "But Alviss discovered it. After Perrault died, I confided my plans to him. I shouldn't have trusted him. He insisted we



should not meddle with Beshaba's will, and he spent the next year and a half searching for the Stone of Beshaba, aided by Beshaba's cultists."

I glanced at Joen and whispered, "The goblins! And those spies in the library."

Jaide nodded. "He had much help. He and his friends tried to stop you in your quest. And he found the stone first. I'm sorry for what had to happen to him."

I gasped. "You killed him?"

"It was the only way. My motives were the purest."

"And that's why you don't look like a demon—like Asbeel," I added.

"Wrong!" Asbeel shouted, his yell echoing in the cavernous temple. "She is not corrupted because she hides away in the sanctuaries of Tymora! Look at her closely in the wider world, boy, you'll see. She's turning. She's changing. She's becoming just like me."

"Enough of this talk," I said.

"Yes, enough indeed," Asbeel answered. "I tire of you, boy. If the ritual is the only way I can be done with you, then so be it. That is what you want, isn't it, dear sister? In full knowledge of the consequences?"

Jaide nodded solemnly. "I know now I cannot stand in the goddess' way."

"Then let it begin," Asbeel said. Asbeel walked through the doors. As soon as he crossed the threshold, his features changed. His face became twisted, his skin took on a red hue, and great black wings sprouted from his back.

"Oi, what consequences?" Joen asked, falling into step behind him, daggers still in hand.

"Our fates," Jaide said, "are tied to the stones. If Maimun succeeds in the ritual, he will destroy the stones and Asbeel and me along with it."

"All these years trying to hide the stones away," Asbeel said, "and only now you choose oblivion?"

"I choose freedom," she replied.



We walked through the city in silence and darkness. The only light was the occasional torch from a guard patrol on the walls, or a candle in the window of a shop or home of a night owl. The only sound was the soft clap of our feet against the cobblestone roads.

Our path wound through the middle of the city, though I was certain it would have been faster to skirt the edges. I assumed at first that Asbeel simply wanted to avoid any potential guard patrols—after all, he was wearing his demonic visage openly, though from past experience I knew he could hide it if he so desired. But he walked with a confident swagger, and he led us with purpose.

So when he came to a stop outside a nondescript building in a nondescript part of town, I was somewhat surprised.

“I thought you said the docks,” I said. “Or would you rather die here?”

Asbeel laughed. “Don’t you recognize this place, boy?” he said.

I looked around for a moment, taking in the scenery. Then it hit me.

“There should be a sign above that door,” I said. “This is the Empty Flagon, Alviss’s tavern.”

“It was indeed,” the demon said with a laugh.

“So you brought me here, why? To show me that even the places you burn down are rebuilt?”

“I didn’t burn it down,” he said.

“Then who did?”

“I don’t care one bit about that. I brought you here to remind you where your dear mentor died. If he cannot best me, what makes you think you can?”

My stiletto was out of its sheath before I fully registered his statement. With a flick of my wrist, I triggered the dagger’s magic, extending it into a fine saber, thin and balanced and just slightly curved. And ever so sharp.

Asbeel laughed again, more loudly. “Not here, boy, and not yet.”

“I say right here,” I growled. “Right now.” I advanced a step.

“Stop.” His voice was forceful, and there was magic behind it as well. I felt the waves of mental energy roll through my brain, commanding my limbs to hold fast, demanding that I obey.

Something seemed to shift in my mind. It flooded down through my body like a shower of warm water. All at once I could feel a series of connections taking shape in my mind and body. Throughout the thirteen months at the Tower of Twilight, I was fed subtle lessons—fragments only—hidden in the exercises and books. I never saw them as connected before, never saw the whole. Never knew I was learning to resist, to make my own choices. To be my own man.

With a silent thanks to Malchor Harpell, I took another step forward, defiant.

“You do not know the ritual,” the demon said, a note of respect in his voice for the first time.

“I don’t care,” I answered. I gripped my sword in both hands, rushed forward, and swung with all my might.

Asbeel brought his empty hand up to block, but it wasn’t empty. His own wicked sword—a huge piece of twisted metal, curved and serrated and burning with red flame—appeared from nowhere to intercept my swing.

I put all my weight behind that blow, all my strength. Metal clashed against metal. Asbeel’s sword, held in one hand, moved barely an inch.

Undeterred, I chopped again, a mighty overhead swing. My defenses were nonexistent. If the demon took a swing at me, I would be helpless.

But he didn’t have time to swing. He could only maneuver his much larger blade up above his head to catch my sword. Again, the ring of steel filled the air. Again, I withdrew my blade, my attack defeated.

*Blue flame*, I thought, and my sword responded. A thin blue fire traced along the sharp edge of the sword, a mirror to Asbeel's red. I brought my sword up beside my ear, set my feet a half step apart. I moved my right hand from the hilt to the blade, resting my palm against the flat of the sword, just above the hilt. I let that hilt rest beside my ear.

"Come, then," I said. "Do your ritual, and let me kill you."

"The ritual," Jaide said, "is simply combat. A bearer fights a Sentinel, the hands of fate—Tymora and Beshaba—choose the victor, and either the bearer dies and the stone passes on, or the Sentinel dies and the stone is no more." Jaide looked to me. "I assume you choose to fight Asbeel."

"Gladly," I gripped the hilt of my sword tighter and glared at the demon.

"Oi, then why do you need all four of us here?" Joen asked.

"Proximity," Jaide said. "The stones must be together to be destroyed."

Asbeel flashed a wicked grin. "It is as I told you, children," he said. "But I choose the time and the place."

I rushed forward, lunging for his heart, but he retreated a few steps. His wings beating mightily, he lifted off the ground.

"The docks," he said. "There we will finish this. Look for my flame." He beat those horrid, batlike wings again, ascending into the night sky.

"Why did he bring you here if he wanted to fight at the docks?" Joen asked.

"He thought he could intimidate me," I said. "But he was wrong. This place doesn't remind me of where Perrault died. Perrault died at the docks when Asbeel struck him. This place is something else, was always something else."

"This is where you brought Perrault when he was injured, right?" Joen said.

"And it's where his dearest friend lived," Jaide added.

I nodded, feeling a new strength surge inside of me. "This was not his death. It was his home," I said.

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO***

If I had any doubt what Asbeel meant when he told me to seek his flame, it was made ever so clear when we reached the docks. A single boat, perhaps thirty feet long with a single sail, sat at the end of one short pier in a nearly empty section of the harbor.

The sail was, incidentally, ablaze.

A small group of people had gathered on the shore nearby to watch. Mostly they were the vagrants of the area, those who would still be awake at this late hour. We pushed through them, and they gave way willingly.

Asbeel awaited our arrival on the boat. He stood directly below the flaming mast.

"Whose ship is this?" I said, stepping to the end of the short pier.

"Ours now," he said. "You've learned much since last we met."

"I have. Have you?"

He laughed. "You have much yet to learn, though."

"We shall see."

"Indeed." He set his feet wide apart, brought his sword up, its jagged, twisted hilt near his forehead. "Come on, then."

I stepped onto the ship, set my feet and my blade, and again called up the sword's blue flame. Joen moved to follow, but I motioned her back.

"I have to do this alone," I said.

Asbeel heard me and laughed.

Joen shook her head. "You ain't alone, though," she said. "I'm here."

"No," I said. "He's mine. Mine alone."

Joen looked hurt. I turned away from her so I wouldn't have to see that expression, so I wouldn't lose my focus on the task at hand.

"You never did get Malchor's lesson, did you?" she asked in a whisper. "He told you to release your arrogance, but you're cocky as ever. And you don't kill."

I heard her, but the words barely registered. I approached Asbeel, weapon at the ready. Joen didn't follow.

I circled to my left, as I had in my spar with Joen, intending to take stock of the demon. He stood impassive, his sword held high, his back to the mast. He didn't even turn his head to follow me. Did he want me to kill him, to be done with it all?

No, I thought, that would be too easy.

I moved all the way around to his right side. Any farther and I would have to contend with the mast itself should I attack. So I had a choice: attack now, or reverse my circle.

The latter would reveal weakness in my approach, so I chose the former.

I stepped forward, bringing the sword in a tight circle over my head, dropping my right hand to the hilt as it swept past my ear. The momentum of the quick motion brought my arms out and my blade whipping around, fast and true, at Asbeel's midsection.

He didn't move at all. My blade sliced right through him—or rather, through the air, through the illusion of the demon. I noticed a bit too late. I couldn't stop my swing. My fine sword bit deeply into the ship's mast.

I heard a rush of air behind me. On the pier, Joen shrieked. The demon swept over the far rail of the ship where he'd been hidden from my view.

I couldn't release my sword. I couldn't block his attack. All I could do was let go of my blade and dive forward, tucking into a roll as I went.

I felt the rush of air, the heat of the demonic flame as his sword swept across just inches above me.

I rolled to my feet, skittering away from the demon. He advanced, smiling wickedly.

"You didn't fight fair!" I yelled.

"Those aren't the rules," he said. "I don't need to fight fair. I just need to win."

As if to enhance his point, he grabbed my stuck sword, pulled it from the wood, and flung it aside. It should have fallen into the water, but at the last moment it hit a guide rope and spun around it, momentum lost, so that the sword fell instead on the deck, though farther away from me.

Asbeel advanced slowly, tracing his finger along the edge of his horrible sword. He seemed to be savoring the moment. I retreated as far as I could, to the stern rail of the ship.

I was out of options. I needed to take a chance. He approached, barely five feet from me, still grinning wickedly. Distracted, maybe?

I dived to the side, to his left, away from his sword hand. I tucked into a roll, meaning to tumble right past the surprised demon. It was a good plan.

Except, of course, he was not surprised. He kicked out his muscled leg, catching me square in the forehead, and sending me skidding across the deck.

"And so it ends," he said somberly, raising his sword for the killing blow.

I struggled to stand, but my head throbbed, my ears rang. I couldn't find my feet. All I could see was that horrid sword, the blade that had killed Perrault, that had taken so much from me.

I heard a scream, but it didn't register. I saw a flash out of the corner of my eye, but it could not take my focus. All I could think of was my impending death.

But then Asbeel withdrew, howling in anger and pain. He turned to face the pier.

Something small, something metal, fell to the deck. It was one of Joen's daggers, its blade wet with Asbeel's blood. She'd thrown it and obviously, she'd hit the mark.

I scrambled forward and grabbed the dagger. He seemed not to take note. I thrust the blade upward, as high as I could reach from my prone position.

It dug deep into Asbeel's thigh, and his scream amplified tenfold.

He brought his sword down, pommel first, driving it into my back. This was not much better than the blade would have been, though. It was that jagged, twisted hilt that had struck Perrault two years ago, that had caused the poisoned wound that had eventually killed him.

The wicked metal cut through my cloak, the once-magical cloak I'd inherited from Perrault, as if it were paper. It dug deep into ...

Not my back. Surprised, I pulled away, scrambling toward the rail, still holding Joen's bloody dagger. Asbeel didn't pursue, instead falling back several steps.

I climbed to my feet, still amazed that I wasn't even wounded. But as I rose, something heavy fell out of my shirt.

The sash that held the stone had taken the blow, and had been severed in the process.

"This is not how it goes!" the demon roared.

"As if you make that choice," I said. I flipped Joen's dagger to her and scooped up my own sword. Together, we advanced on the wounded demon.

A column of light, narrow and small but brighter than any torch, appeared in front of Joen, then another and another, quickly encircling her. She tried to move forward, but the light was like a steel cage.

"He is correct," Jaide said, stepping onto the ship. No longer were her hands empty. She held a staff, itself also appearing as if it were made of light. I'd seen her fight with



that staff one time, against Asbeel. "Joel should not interfere, and she will not again. This fight is for you alone."

"It is already tainted," Asbeel spat. "The wench has already defiled the battle."

"Then Jaide should release her," I said. "And we'll just kill you, ritual be damned." I scooped up the severed sash, held it high. "I'm starting to think I like this thing after all."

Asbeel growled, but had no answer.

I settled into my attack stance again, and the demon set his guard high, as his illusion had done earlier. But he clearly favored his uninjured right leg. Blood poured out of the wound in his left.

I decided to change tactics and abandoned the Eastern-influenced stance I'd adopted at Malchor's tower.

I set my trailing foot behind me, angled left to right, and my forward foot I set under me, pointing straight at my foe. I let my right hand trail behind me, curled up like the tail of a scorpion. I brought my sword to my forehead in mock salute, sweeping it out to the side then back to my defensive posture.

"So you regress," the demon said snidely. "You fall back on Perrault's style, the one that got him killed."

I didn't bother answering the demon. I shuffled ahead a few steps and lunged, dropping my trailing arm and leg to full extension, the tip of my sword leaping for his heart, my whole body a perfectly balanced, perfectly smooth line.

Asbeel brought his sword across and picked off my attack, but the motion clearly pained him. I withdrew. The length of my retreat, a full three feet plus the length of my blade, put me out of even his considerable reach, should he wish to counterattack. I lunged again, this time angling my sword to my right and down, directly at his wounded leg.

He brought his sword down, but not quite quickly enough. My blade grazed along the already bleeding limb, opening a fresh gash.

Asbeel howled and swung his sword, aiming for my head, but I had already withdrawn and reset, and his blade whistled past harmlessly short.

As soon as the sword passed, I lunged, again aiming for his wounded leg. He could not possibly defend with his blade, so he instead tried to move the leg. But it was slow, and he was off balance, and I scored another solid hit.

Asbeel tried to retreat, but I paced him, stabbing at his leg repeatedly, sometimes hitting, sometimes just missing, but always keeping him on the defensive, on the retreat. I drove him all the way back to the far rail of the ship, and lined up one final lunge.

He was wounded, he was tired, he was off balance. There was no way he could stop my attack. I lunged for the demon's foul heart.

As I started my motion, the deck before me burst into flames. Immensely hot, they rocketed ten feet into the sky, a wall of red fire. I only barely managed to stop myself from diving headfirst into the blaze. My arm sunk in to the elbow.

In searing pain, I withdrew. Only by Tymora's cursed luck was I still holding my sword. I couldn't feel my arm at all. I fell to the deck, writhing in agony, trying in vain to regain some composure before the demon dropped upon me.

He emerged from the fire limping heavily, barely able to put any weight on his many-times-wounded leg. But he would not have to in order to kill me, I knew. My mind screamed at my body to stand, to mount some defense, but my muscles would not heed the call. All I could manage was a crawl toward the pier, a futile attempt to escape.

It became even more futile as another wall of flame leaped up from that rail. I heard the lines tying the ship to the dock snap. We were drifting in the current of the great river Chionthar, headed for the open sea.

Asbeel laughed at me. "I don't even need to do anything, do I?" he said. "The fire alone will kill you and the girl."

Within the cage, Joen was crying and mouthing words, but the magic apparently also blocked sound. I heard nothing.

I was about to die, and I just wanted to hear her voice. I looked at her, into her beautiful emerald eyes. At least these two beings could not steal that from me, that last look.

Asbeel approached, albeit slowly, and raised his sword.

I brought my own blade up in my right hand, my left tucked uselessly against my chest. It would offer a feeble defense, I knew.

Asbeel's sword started its descent.

Then it flew away, along with the demon.

Haze had plowed in hard, driving her head into Asbeel's chest, launching him across the deck. She stood over me as I shakily rose to my feet, still clutching the sword in my good hand.

The demon roared, rising to his feet, every bit as shaky as I was.

There it was, at last, I knew. The truth of what Malchor had told me. I had to lay aside my arrogance, else I would face the demon alone. And had I been alone—truly alone, as I insisted moments earlier—I would be dead already.

Above, I heard one of the crossbeams holding the sail snap, then the other. The flaming canvas dropped to the deck.

"Well, I said it already," Asbeel said, his voice once again confident. "I can just let the fire kill you."

I leaned heavily against Haze, the heat of the inferno sapping my strength. I could hardly argue. Even Haze seemed somehow less substantial in the fire.

And less, and less. A thick fog rolled out from the mare even as her physical form seemed to fade. Soon, the boat was blanketed in a thick cloud of cool fog. It didn't last long, fading after mere moments, and when it was gone, Haze was nowhere to be seen.

Neither was the fire, though. The fog had quenched it completely.

“And so another one dies,” Asbeel taunted.

“You know what the difference is between you and me?” I asked.

“There are oh so many! Age, prowess, wisdom, take your pick.”

“It’s much simpler than that,” I said. “I can walk.”

I rushed forward in a suicidal charge, swinging my sword wildly.

Asbeel blocked my first swing and my second, but on my third, he missed the parry.

Perrault’s magical saber dug deep into his shoulder. I pressed with all my might, forcing the demon and his weakened leg over backward. He fell hard to the deck, his sword slipping from his grasp, over the rail, and into the water below.

I withdrew my blade, lining up the killing blow. Asbeel grabbed it with his bare hands, wincing in agony as the blue flame burned his flesh.

“What do you fear the most, child?” he whispered.

“Not you.”

“No. You fear the loss of something.”

I glanced at Joen, only for a heartbeat, but Asbeel saw it.

“Exactly,” he said, and he let go.

My sword drove into his chest, through his heart, and out his back.

The demon gasped in pain. “She lied to you,” he whispered.

“You’ve all done nothing but lie to me,” I spat.

“My sister. She lied. The ritual is in two parts. If one bearer kills his Sentinel ...”

I twisted the blade, and Asbeel writhed. “Done,” I said.

“Then, the other Sentinel kills ...” His words trailed off, his eyes went dark.

It took me a moment to register his words—a moment I didn’t have.

“Joen!” I cried, turning to face her. The magical cage had fallen away, and she was smiling at me.

Jaide’s magical staff was swinging for the back of her head.

And Joen had no idea.

The staff struck her hard, the dull crack echoing across the water. Joen fell limp, tumbling over the rail into the rushing river.

I ran across the deck to the rail, still holding my bloody sword. But the water was pitch black, and I could see nothing.

“Joen!” I called. “Where are you! Answer me, please!”

“She’s gone,” Jaide said softly.

I turned on her, bringing my sword up. “You lied to me,” I snarled.

She nodded.

I rushed in to attack and she didn’t defend herself. With hardly a thought, I plunged my sword into her chest. As with Asbeel, I drove Perrault’s sword through her heart and out her back.

Asbeel had been Perrault’s sworn enemy, had killed the great bard. Jaide had been his friend, had helped protect him—and me.

But she was a liar and a murderer. I withdrew my sword, and she tumbled to the deck. I drove it in again.

“I am sorry,” she whispered. “But you are free now.”

Her eyes closed for the last time.

I slumped to the deck beside her. The stone, still in its sash, rolled across the deck to me.

Free, yes. But broken too.

## ***EPILOGUE***



"A terrible woe that be," the pirate captain said. "And I see why ye didn't want ter tell us tha' end. But tell me, young man, aren't ye glad ye got it off yer chest?"

I managed a smile past the moisture in my eyes. Yes, it had hurt, but it had felt good too.

"How long has it been since?" he asked.

"Two long years," I said. "And until you took it from me when you took me captive, I carried the stone still.

To remind me of what I lost."

The pirate captain nodded. "So, will ye reconsider me offer?" he said.

I shook my head no.

"Aye, I thought not. But either way, ye'll be needing this back." He held out his arm, extending the torn leather sash that still cradled the Stone of Tymora.

"No," I said through the lump in my throat. "I won't. It's not magical anymore."

"Funny," he said. "I got me a couple wizards on me crew, an' they looked at it good, an' they tell me it still be powerful magic."

I shrugged and said, "Maybe some residual ..."

"See, they also say this one's magic too." He withdrew a small black object from his pocket and rolled it to me.

The Stone of Beshaba.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

A female voice spoke up from behind me, from the entrance to the cave. "He got it from me."

I turned to face her. Her blonde hair, freshly cut, bounced across her shoulders, and her broad smile lit the beach around her. Her emerald eyes, wet around the rims, bored into me.

Joen.



I rose unsteadily to my feet as she approached, slowly at first, then all in a rush. She wrapped her arms around me in a great bear hug.

"How ... I thought ...," I stammered, searching for something to say.

She brought her finger to my lips to silence me. I stopped talking, stopped even trying, and just looked at her.

She leaned in close, moved her finger out of the way just long enough to plant a quick kiss on my lips. Then she tipped her head, indicating the pirates behind me.

I turned to look and saw that the pirates were kneeling before her.

"A good yarn indeed," the pirate captain said to Joen. "You were right as a'ways, me queen."

"You're qu—?" I started.

"That's a whole other story," Joen said. "It'll take a while in the telling."

I looked around at the gathered pirates, the island beach, the predawn light breaking over the horizon. I laughed at the thought that this, here, was home—a home that Joen had brought me to.

"I've got time," I said. "And freedom."

## ***About the Authors***

**R.A. Salvatore** is the author of forty novels and more than a dozen *New York Times* best sellers, including *The Pirate King* which debuted at #3 on *The New York Times* best seller list.

**Geno Salvatore** has collaborated on several R.A. Salvatore projects including Fast Forward Games' *R.A. Salvatore's The DemonWars Campaign Setting* and *R.A. Salvatore's The DemonWars Player's Guide*. He co-authored *R.A. Salvatore's DemonWars Prologue*, a *DemonWars* short story that appeared in the comic book published by Devil's Due Publishing. He is a recent graduate of Boston University and lives in Massachusetts.

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# R.A. SALVATORE & GENO



## STONE OF TYMORA THE & SENTINELS

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